**Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty”: 1800-1850**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the historical development of Thomas Jefferson's idea of an American Empire of Liberty. In considering Jeffersonian political thought and related early republican values, the paper explores the ways in which westward expansion and other political developments thwarted any hopes for such an empire.

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**Introduction**

Thomas Jefferson’s election to the presidency in 1800 is said to have represented a “revolutionary” break from the Federalist theory of government. Yet, over the course of the next half-century, his vision of a nation anchored by the rule of local governments, civic virtue, and the protection of personal liberties, was severely challenged. American national development was increasingly marked by the growing power of the federal government and a westward expansion that brought to the fore powerful opposing interpretations of both liberty and citizenship. By mid-century, the United States, having doubled its size under Jefferson’s purchase of the Louisiana Territory as president, was on the brink of being severed along opposing ideological lines. Slavery was the critical question, as it had been at the Constitutional Convention – and the ensuing progression of national compromises could only stave off a solution to Jefferson’s zero-sum equation gleaned from the Missouri Compromise in 1820. Upon learning of the scheme to balance the slaveholding and non-slaveholding power of the states in Congress, Jefferson said America faced the choice of “Justice or [white] self-preservation.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The prospect of racial annihilation as a plausible outcome of the decidedly Herrenvolk (ethnically defined) nature of the early American republic was not a concern unique to Jefferson. Alexis de Tocqueville would later formulate a similar accounting of American life (he purposely left the nation’s race relations outside the purview of his discussion of democracy, seeing it as an undemocratic feature of his investigation). Indeed, Tocqueville painted an uncharacteristically bleak portrait of “the future of the three races in America” in *Democracy in America* (1835), offering that at best, the indigenous Native American population would be exterminated, with blacks and whites likely partners in a destructive and pathological struggle – one for supremacy (for whites), and the other, for personhood (for blacks). Reflecting on the atrocities committed against Native Americans during his sojourn in America, Tocqueville was deeply and uncommonly pessimistic:

[These are] great evils; and it must be added that they appear to me to be irremediable. I believe that the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish, and that whenever the Europeans shall be established on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, that race of men will have ceased to exist.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The incompatibility of white supremacy with black and Indian personhood defined the parameters of a larger national struggle for settling the newly acquired western territories. Only in the states established by the Northwestern Ordinance was there a clear delineation of a nonracial commitment to citizenship. The 1787 agreement between the states and federal government included a ban on slavery. This fact would be a vital part of Abraham Lincoln’s case against slavery as a natural guiding principle of American statehood. At Cooper Union in New York in 1860, Lincoln would retrospectively invalidate the notion that the United States had been from the start, a white man’s republic. The prohibition against slavery in the northwestern territories was a critical feature of his argument.[[3]](#endnote-3) But Lincoln, however artfully, was also selectively excising much of 19th century political history, one whose climactic event up to that point, had been a war waged against Mexico, one deeply motivated by the desire to expand slavery. Lincoln argued against war with Mexico, as had abolitionists and the early Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson; but theirs was a losing argument (as all arguments opposing slavery’s expansion had been).

But even here, both Lincoln and the early abolitionists were proponents of separation – the colonization of blacks to Africa upon emancipation. This had not been very different from Jefferson’s view expressed in his “fire bell in the night” letter to John Holmes, equating black freedom with white annihilation. Jefferson wrote Holmes teasing out the possibility, however remote, of “emancipation and *expatriation*,” a view presaging Lincoln’s own best hopes, up until very late in his life. This was the “enlightened” view of black liberation at the time, one very much tied to the practical politics of the period, as cheap and plentiful western lands were ripe for settlement, linking white male suffrage to Indian removal and black slavery. Jefferson was as unhopeful as Tocqueville would prove to be:

I can say with conscious truth 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. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me in a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and *expatriation* could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The expansion of democratic politics, so esteemed by historians of “the Age of Jackson” was also, ironically enough, contingent upon the denial of political rights to women, who increasingly saw their apolitical status (with rare exception in the states) as cause for protest and political organization. Democracy required time, and the demands for both domestic and manual labor followed the classical Greek model co-joining slavery with the political sequestration of women.

The opening chapter of James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) painted the Herrenvolk idyll quite well. The setting of the French and Indian War quite literally, colors the novel with an edenic, pre-Independence world of possibilities. The American nation was to emerge out of a contested milieu of Anglo, French, and Indian confrontations. As the Book of Genesis is in many ways a “genetic” and ancestral narrative of Adam’s family history, so too is Cooper’s opening one of genetic origins and possibilities. Two sisters - Alice, with a “dazzling complexion” and “fair golden hair,” is accompanied on a journey by the mixed-race Cora (simply described as “the other” with a “complexion not brown”).[[5]](#endnote-5) As the Indian scout Magua runs past the women seated in their carriage, it is Cora who betrays an attraction for him, drawn to his dark form in a lustful gaze. Alice, on the other hand, gasps with revulsion. This is Cooper’s impressionistic sketch of the early American sexual-racial template for survival. Cora’s mixed-race status renders her incapable of producing a new (and pure) world of republican freedom. This is literary hindsight, of course, as all founding myths must be. But Cooper’s vision, at least, in its backdrop, illustrates a first principle found in Jacksonian America: all mulattoes must be tragic (as is Cora’s end in the novel). The hue of the cheeks of women from Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, to Cooper’s *Mohicans*, must be white – “pink” for Jefferson (as opposed to “the monotonous veil of black” the master of Monticello found in African American women). Cooper’s literary coloration was “bright and delicate.”

It is only Herman Melville who challenges the early literary presumption of racial purity drawn in this way, labeling the “butterfly cheeks” of young [white] girls “a deceit” in *Moby Dick*. For Melville, humanity is ultimately united by the “charnel house within” – the commonality of our individual deaths. Whiteness, properly understood, exists in the imagination at best. At worst, it is the springboard for the nation’s demise (“Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?”).[[6]](#endnote-6)

For Melville, the hunt alluded to at the end of his chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale,” was in part emblematic of the hunt for Mexico, for more slave territories, for greater wealth, power, and national prestige. Melvillian political thought, transcendent as it was, was unfortunately like that of his character Starbuck, an eloquent but minor democratic note of the times, one drowned out by the push for “Manifest Destiny.” Starbuck muses about killing Ahab – “Shall this crazed old man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship’s company down to doom with him?” – but he is paralyzed against doing so. Melville is keen on presenting how desperate the lost moment is, as there is no other opposition to Ahab’s tyranny on board the Pequod.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Yet, national greatness was an objective questioned from the beginning, at least as far back as Virginia’s constitutional ratifying convention in 1787. There, Patrick Henry said “Some way or other we must be a great and mighty empire.”[[8]](#endnote-8) He did not mean it as a compliment. Before long, Jefferson negotiated a fusion between Henry’s coveted, but losing national focus on “liberty” (at least white male liberty), with the Federalist desire to create a powerful nation. And so, Jefferson’s seemingly incompatible coupling of founding conceits was born. The United States was now to become an “Empire of Liberty.”

*Revolution Betrayed? The Election of 1800 and Beyond*

The election of Thomas Jefferson was the first in modern history where a democratically elected political party took power from another. Highlighting the theme of national unity, Jefferson wrote in his inaugural address that “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” Where Washington’s Farewell Address prioritized the ethno-cultural unity of the nation (“with slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles”), Jefferson sought to promote a national unity based upon a commitment to limited self-government.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Jefferson came to power in most unusual fashion, having defeated Aaron Burr, his prospective Vice President, through a vote in the House of Representatives, owing to a tie in the Electoral College. The delicate nature of American democracy required presidential rhetorical pledges to unity and republican heterodoxy. But, Jefferson’s inaugural revealed the fingerprints of his attempt at a radical break from Federalist power and its emphasis on a large, strong central government. “I know, indeed,” Jefferson said, “that some honest men fear that republican government cannot be strong, that this government is not strong enough.” But what made America strong, he argued, was its people’s attachment to the rule of law, not the might of its rulers.[[10]](#endnote-10) Jefferson aspired to a government more durable and stronger than the one provided in the Articles of Confederation, but also one far less energetic than desired by his Federalist rivals.

This rejection of Hamiltonian government became most perplexing given Jefferson’s decision to unilaterally take it upon himself, presumably as an unspoken power of his constitutional authority, to purchase the enormity of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. The once imagined sparsely populated, agrarian nation of small farmers, closely tied to their government in little ward republics, became almost overnight, a massive continental state with an imperial nature imprinted upon it just 20 years after the Peace of Paris. The political scientist Ted Lowi, echoing any number of skeptics over the years, thought the purchase was of questionable constitutionality at best. He was not alone. So did Jefferson.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Jefferson’s act virtually assured slavery’s continuation into the newly acquired western territories. Dubbed a “Negro President” by his critics as the historian Garry Wills has noted, (owing to Jefferson’s election based on the difference in additional electoral votes cast in the South from the Three Fifths Compromise), Jefferson singlehandedly diminished the prospects of the institution’s demise.[[12]](#endnote-12) As the historian Robin Blackburn pointed out “The Louisiana Purchase confirmed that the United States was an empire as well as a republic and it confirmed that slaveholders would have their own reserved space within that empire. Because he was President, because of his historic role, and because he was a Virginian, Jefferson was the only man who could have prevented this development.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

While Gordon Wood and others have argued Jefferson’s use of the term “Empire of Liberty” was not an expression of imperialistic intent in the conventional sense of empire’s meaning, the term was fraught with troubling attachments even in the early nineteenth century. And Jefferson’s use must also be understood as validating a certain kind of empire, perhaps new in the world (from Jefferson’s point of view): one that would carry the blessings of self-government with it throughout its expanse. Of course, this was very much in keeping with Napoleonic sentiments of liberté, as France sought to justify its growing empire as an extension of revolutionary values. That the Louisiana Purchase was made possible because of Napoleon’s financial troubles owing to the growing ferocity of the black slave revolts and burgeoning revolution on Sainte-Domingue, cannot be lost in any assessment of Jeffersonian political thought. Indeed, one might correctly attach Jefferson to Andrew Jackson in terms of his uplifting an ethos of white settler expansionist policy, as much as for the more readily employed comparison of his support for mass democracy.

That the virtues of local government were intertwined with the near exclusivity of white citizenship from the nation’s inception lent the initial Anti-Federalist, and later Democratic Party’s position on states’ rights both morally and philosophically compromised. Where Andrew Jackson would espouse an anti-centrist governing philosophy, it would be on matters pertaining to Indian Removal (1831), economic populism (opposition to the National Bank), and the authority of the executive branch to lead (as in his fight with his former Vice President John C. Calhoun in opposing South Carolina’s attempt at nullification over tariff policy). Jacksonian democracy epitomized white nationalist politics, with the chief opposition coming from John Marshall’s court, whose imposition of institutional constraints were largely successful on questions of constitutional interpretation regarding the role of the federal government; they were otherwise impotent with respect to the rights of Native Americans and questions of slavery (at least up until 1817).[[14]](#endnote-14)

The period was thus one of tilted democratic development – the surge in white electoral rights and liberties with western expansion, coinciding with the forced migration of Native Americans to barren settlements in the West. Slavery soon followed the path of this forced migration, ensuring a chokehold of political power for the South up until mid-century, with Jefferson but the first of numerous “Negro” presidents.

With no real opposition party confronting the newly evolved Democratic Party, the “Era of Good Feelings” was characterized as much by religious zeal as it was by politics. The Second Great Awakening infused morally based arguments into political debate, moving national discourse away from more secular, Enlightenment premises. While fervent in their antislavery position, those advocating abolition were still more inclined to support colonization, while those who invoked biblical theories of white racial superiority argued that the institution of slavery had “improved” the status of blacks in the New World. Politically, the emergent Whig Party was split along pro and anti-slavery lines, further weakening the political forces that otherwise might have struck a blow against slavery’s expansion. As the abolitionist movement moved away from colonization to black political equality, some Whigs like Abraham Lincoln, staked out a middle ground, one neither abolitionist, nor expansionist. Between the Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Compromise of 1850, slavery only grew in influence, along with the two opposing views of the institution’s place within American society.

With the death of Jefferson in 1826 and Andrew Jackson’s election in 1828, post-revolutionary forces had grown to define a new set of challenges and opportunities for American democracy. The role of the national government had grown in its power – western settlement, banking interests, and a second war with England – all played a role in moving the country away from the civic republican ideal of the nation’s founders. But, there remained formidable opposition to the centralizing forces of the period. These were critically arrayed against the first wave of mass European immigration, movements to empower women, more radical calls for emancipation, and those voices calling for restraint against the impulse for territorial conquest. These were not new debates, but they had been made perceptibly more volatile, if not intractable – a byproduct of Jefferson’s compromises with his earliest political thought. With slavery removed from national discourse quite literally by Congress with a forced gag rule on debate, the silence over the deepest divide in national political life allowed for a relative period of national unity over other questions, with Congress and House Speaker Henry Clay, playing an outsized role in these matters.

The period was thus defined by the Jacksonian politics of white democratic populism – a racialized nationalism buoyed by territorial claims on Native, Spanish, and formerly French lands. The intellectual repudiation of Jacksonian politics was political Whiggery and the emergence of the Transcendentalist movement, highlighted by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Importantly, the movement not only espoused a reorientation towards nature and a cosmology of self-directedness; it also was committed to a vision of human equality that defied the period’s racial and gender politics.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Furthering the Transcendentalist message, the writings of Margaret Fuller presented a political vision of gender equality that was a forerunner of the Suffragist Movement that followed. The abolitionists soon embraced the push for women’s rights, although the relationship between the two movements would on occasion clash.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Perhaps no one would meld the Whig ideal of constitutional democracy with the Transcendental ideal as well as Abraham Lincoln. But even the more moderate Whig appeals to preserving the Union could not prevent movement towards secession and Civil War; only the unprecedented and shocking bloodletting that ensued presented the occasion for a rethinking of national priorities. Despite the sectional struggles that resulted from westward expansion and the difficulty of balancing political power in Congress, nationalists embraced war with Mexico – an evident, yet popularly lauded betrayal of the Jeffersonian impulse towards a small, peaceful, democratic state.

*Black Rebellion and Nation-Keeping*

When Thomas Jefferson expressed opposition to King George III’s “exciting domestic insurrections” in the American colonies in the Declaration of Independence, he gave voice to the fear of black revolt in the United States. That fear, present from the founding, grew to shape not only national politics but also American political thought. Five years later in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson reiterated the sentiment, this time referencing the role of memory in prospective black violence:

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Such “recollections” were believed to be the spurs to violent action, emanating from an uncontrollable disposition on the part of blacks to exact revenge upon their former masters. Not unlike his view of white insurrection in the case of Shays’ Rebellion, Jefferson saw black rebellion as a wholly just and rational act. “I tremble for my country,” Jefferson wrote in *Notes on Virginia*, “when I remember God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The demographic makeup of the United States – an incomparably young nation with an enslaved racial minority largely concentrated in one portion of the country – was a critical factor in American political development for the better part of the 19th century. The harshest laws and more brutal forms of chattel slavery were located in the Deep South, where the numbers of enslaved Africans reached levels near those of whites (and in some counties, surpassing them). The intensification of this relationship between fear and repression was heightened by the situation on the island of Saint Domingue, where the colonial French administered portion of the island – Haiti – was swept up in revolutionary fervor, and ultimately, independence.

The cost of black liberation in the New World proved to be a bloodletting of the white colonial class of Haiti. The implications were not simply theoretical for southerners, though a formidable political theory of white supremacy was advanced. A new and modern form of racialized statecraft was given the veneer of intellectual heft through the writings and speeches of John C. Calhoun, whose racist reasoning was readily coupled with southern arguments for states’ rights. His speech, “Slavery as a Positive Good,”was perfectly tailored to the needs of southern planter society, as both a counter to northern industrial interests and the cause of abolition.

We of the South will not, cannot, surrender our institutions. To maintain the existing relations between the two races, inhabiting that section of the Union, is indispensable to the peace and happiness of both… Be it good or bad, [slavery] has grown up with our society and institutions, and is so interwoven with them that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people. But let me not be understood as admitting, even by implication, that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding States is an evil: –far otherwise; I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both, and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Aside from the idea of slavery as a “positive good,” southerners also justified the continuation of the institution as a bulwark against black violence against whites. The Gabriel Prosser (1800), Denmark Vesey (1822), and Nat Turner (1831) plots and revolts were illustrative links in a chain of anti-black politics justifying racial repression, by both the state and its citizens. It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln’s first public address of consequence, his speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum (1838) was in response to the public burning of a black man named Francis J. McIntosh by a mob of whites in St. Louis. McIntosh’s murder aroused the white abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy, who condemned the attack as an act of “savage barbarity.” McIntosh’s “crime” for which he was imprisoned, and later removed from his cell to be summarily executed, remains in some historic dispute. But the justification for it at the time was a purported act of violence on his part. American extrajudicial violence – terror – had its roots not only in slavery and settler conquest – it was also steeped in retributive notions of justice for even the suggestion of violence against whites. It was not the scourge of slavery that Lincoln focused on in his address, but rather the growing tendency towards lawlessness.

There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law. In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.[[20]](#endnote-20)

As Rogers Smith and Desmond King have argued, America’s racial orders were woven into institutional practices suited to the historical moment; and yet, the founding itself created, argued for, and pushed to sustain, a de facto racial order that was routinely challenged by black and Indian populations from the very beginning. The “positive good” Calhoun suggested as the rationale for slavery was steeped in pseudo Christian theology – a kind of Providential claim on black lives that were enriched somehow in the furnace of the American slave experience. The most basic counter of course, was the responses of enslaved (and free) blacks themselves – especially those literate, and biblically trained. Such counters were part of a cyclical process of oppression, revolt, (state) terror, intensification of legal and extralegal repression, and then revolt. Racial quiescence was never fully attained, though black and Indian populations were unmistakably the principle victims of this ritual cycle. For Lincoln, American democratic norms, precious and ever fleeting, also suffered in the process.

Tocqueville understood early on, that a warped psychological dimension of identification between master and slave buttressed the material nature of American slavery. Where Native Americans were able to retain a semblance of autonomy both geographically and psychically from whites, blacks were more deeply connected to whites through chattel slavery. This proximity insisted upon black self-rejection and an unattainable longing for white identity. It was, perhaps, the earliest description of black double-consciousness, at least from an outsider; and it foreshadowed the kind of social analysis found over a century later in Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*:

The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men who repulse him; he conforms to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their opinions, and hopes by imitating them to form a part of their community. Having been told from infancy that his race is naturally inferior to that of the whites, he assents to the proposition and is ashamed of his own nature. In each of his features he discovers a trace of slavery, and if it were in his power, he would willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The great irony for Tocqueville was that black identification with whites created the possibility for group survival, whereas for Indians, psychological independence and an unwillingness to adapt (at least in Tocqueville’s eyes), to Anglo culture, meant certain extermination. Thus, one of the more profound expositions in American political thought carried with it another zero-sum game of racial hierarchy.

Tocqueville did not draw much on the experience of black rebellion, as Arthur Kaledin, has pointed out.[[22]](#endnote-22) Nor did he devote much time to the suffrage or nascent labor movements of the period. But he did speak to the central American conflict of race, given slavery’s inherent incompatibility with democratic norms – something that at the time, very few associated with the need for gender equality. That black rebellion and revolutionary potentiality (related to Haiti) escaped his discussion of race in America, represents a considerable hole in Tocqueville’s understanding of how race and slavery worked in the early to mid 19th century. Nevertheless, he did capture an important dimension of racial oppression – first acknowledging that the American slave system was not a natural outgrowth of inherited white superiority as Calhoun and others argued; on the contrary, Tocqueville saw slavery’s continuation in an otherwise democratic society as a fundamentally brutish capitulation on the part of whites to political power and greed.

It is no small irony then, that among the most incisive reflections related to American political thought and race at mid-century, *Democracy in America* came not from the mind of an American, but rather from a youthful outsider, interested in his country avoiding those antidemocratic elements of social and political life of a nation he otherwise wished his country to emulate.

*Suffrage and Citizenship*

While he did not believe “men had any business” in Seneca Falls, and if present, “should take back benches and wrap themselves in silence,” Frederick Douglass, an early supporter of women’s suffrage, was one of the few men in attendance at the historic 1848 convention. Douglass drew a clear line between his opposition to slavery, and the rights of women to be equal citizens, saying that “all good causes are mutually helpful.”[[23]](#endnote-23) His 1888 reflections on his participation at the event organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, some forty years later, reveal the slow march of progress on the issue, as it would be another 20 years before women would gain the right to vote.

Early American notions of gender equality took the form of what would later be called “republican motherhood,” an argument for the domestic, and quite limited freedom of women to instruct their children in the precepts of democratic life within the home. This private instruction was to be advanced in the civic arena by sons, who would contribute to the republic as a result of the education and moral values received within the home. As Linda Kerber has pointed out, this was an Enlightenment-informed worldview, one largely traced to John Locke[[24]](#endnote-24). Republican motherhood (a term coined by Kerber) emerged as a response to the more radical political ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft, who viewed female domesticity as an affront to women’s basic humanity.

It is a measure of the conservatism of the Revolution that women remained on the periphery of the political community; it is possible to read the subsequent political history of women in America as the story of women’s efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution had failed to do. From the time of the Revolution to our own day, the language of Republican Motherhood remains the most readily accepted – though certainly not the most radical justification for women’s political behavior.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Early feminists worked to extend the rights of women beyond the private sphere. While Abigail Adams’ letter to John Adams (attending the Philadelphia convention for the drafting of the Declaration of Independence at the time) admonished him and the male delegates in attendance to “Remember the Ladies,” this movement for more public rights, including suffrage, did not gain popular support until the 1830s and 1840s. It was not coincidental that the abolitionist movement grew in influence during this period, as religious and ethical arguments for the full humanity and citizenship for blacks compelled similar considerations and arguments for the equality of women. While political progress related to these twin movements was uneven and staggered, the roots of later success for feminists and abolitionists alike, could be tied to this period.

As the historian Ibram X. Kendi has shown, black and white women’s responses to slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act at mid-century gave rise to calls for full equality irrespective of race or gender. Indeed, “many of the early White women suffragists had spent years in the trenches of abolitionism, oftentimes recognizing the interlocking nature of American racism and sexism.”[[26]](#endnote-26) After Seneca Falls, the pace of the women’s movement intensified, with the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Dana Gage, and Sojourner Truth, all fashioning political and religious arguments toward the end of gender inequality. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca echoed the Declaration of Independence in affirming the universality of political equality – while advancing the still contentious point, that women were the intellectual, physical, and social equals of men. The document was radical in its efforts to upend traditional and repressive roles accorded to women; by using the format and language of the Declaration of Independence, it linked American male political actors as agents of a similar kind of oppression that beset the colonists some three-quarters of a century before.

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Unfortunately, the case for women’s rights would echo other similarly troubling political rationales throughout American history; namely the juxtaposition of perceived “less desirable” groups – in this instance “foreigners” - against those viewed as more worthy.[[28]](#endnote-28)

In her effort to further the women’s movement, Sojourner Truth emphasized the racial oppression of black women, who had been, and remained, perhaps the most alienated persons in American society. “Ain’t I a woman?” Truth asked at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. Truth’s question presented an ironic, multifaceted view of the interlocking dimensions of racial and gender identity. White feminists viewed being “merely” a woman as a form of acquiescence to oppressive masculine norms; for Truth, womanhood for whites nevertheless conferred a level of benevolent treatment – a kind of humanity, reduced though it was – that was divorced from the experience of black women. Truth’s query (always the best of philosophical redirections) contained a powerful subtext: black women were neither fully human, nor were they women. They resided at best in some intermediary state, not far removed from Jefferson’s assessment, in *Notes on Virginia*, which rendered them more appropriate for the ardor of the “Oranatan” than human males.

In a prescient passage from his chapter on “The Future of the Three Races in America,” Alexis de Tocqueville illustrated an early version of racial triangulation, later theorized by the political scientist Claire Jean Kim.[[29]](#endnote-29) Tocqueville’s portrait was of his experience in Alabama when happening upon a white girl, cared for by a black woman, who was otherwise engaged with an Indian woman. The trio, all of whom lacked full social standing in America based upon their status as females, nevertheless represented different placements within America’s racial hierarchy. The passage is worth reviewing at length:

I remember that while I was traveling through the forests which still cover the state of Alabama, I arrived one day at the log house of a pioneer. I did not wish to penetrate into the dwelling of the American, but retired to rest myself for a while on the margin of a spring, which was not far off, in the woods. While I was in this place (which was in the neighborhood of the Creek territory ), an Indian woman appeared, followed by a Negress, and holding by the hand a little white girl of five or six years, whom I took to be the daughter of the pioneer. A sort of barbarous luxury set off the costume of the Indian; rings of metal were hanging from her nostrils and ears, her hair, which was adorned with glass beads, fell loosely upon her shoulders; and I saw that she was not married, for she still wore that necklace of shells which the bride always deposits on the nuptial couch. The Negress was clad in squalid European garments. All three came and seated themselves upon the banks of the spring; and the young Indian, taking the child in her arms, lavished upon her such fond caresses as mothers give, while the Negress endeavored, by various little artifices, to attract the attention of the young Creole. The child displayed in her slightest gestures a consciousness of superiority that formed a strange contrast with her infantine weakness; as if she received the attentions of her companions with a sort of condescension. The Negress was seated on the ground before her mistress, watching her smallest desires and apparently divided between an almost maternal affection for the child and servile fear; while the savage, in the midst of her tenderness, displayed an air of freedom and pride which was almost ferocious.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Again, for Tocqueville, the psychological dimension of slavery is rendered as significant as the physical and political nature of the institution. The bas relief of racial oppression is made clearer by attending to the manner in which African, Indigenous, and Anglo identities become foci of external power dynamics. The fact that the three are female demonstrates the unequal effects of racial identity on social status; even age lacks its ordinary significance as a barometer for elevated status, as the white girl remains the central figure of the scene around whom the other women orbit.

Later in the century, Douglass and other blacks would argue the case for the primacy of Negro suffrage before women’s. The rationale was that the American political order could not absorb both causes simultaneously, and that the historical circumstances of black oppression – slavery – had necessitated the completion of black rights before insisting on the same for women. The debate was fraught with tension and animosity between the two movements at times, particularly as the 15th Amendment was circumvented after Reconstruction with the advent of Jim Crow laws and black disenfranchisement. Black women were double-victims in this period of stasis with respect to women’s suffrage and the retrenchment of black male voting rights.[[31]](#endnote-31) The history of the 19th century proved to be one largely defined by conflict over the spoils of white men who were the chief beneficiaries of Jefferson’s Empire of Liberty, rather than the more optimistic hope for “a new birth of freedom” promised by Lincoln.

Jeffersonian political thought may have allowed for the potentiality of black, native, and women’s equality with that of white males, but it offered no political program, nor did the territorial expansion of the republic improve its chances. Indeed, expansion intensified the contraction of rights. Abolitionists and suffragists alike, were confronted with a remarkably different country in 1850 than the one they labored in during the early Jackson era. The nation’s borders had expanded to encompass half of Mexico’s territory, won through annexation and war; the United States was becoming an increasingly industrial nation, dependent upon cheap labor and the many new immigrants who provided it. With westward expansion the driving force of national politics, the liberties so coveted by the revolutionary generation, were no longer a preeminent concern. The push for land, continental and indeed, hemispheric dominance (as indicated in Monroe’s precedent-setting doctrine in 1823), further marginalized the status of anyone but white Protestant males. None bore the brunt of this messianic movement more than American Indians, whose land, lives, and liberties were discarded as readily as the American government’s promises to them during the period. The Empire of Liberty had become a settler nation, a White Republic – a Herrenvolk democracy defined chiefly by whiteness as the sin qua non for political and social status. At mid-century, Herman Melville could only lament, that “Not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

*Settlement Nation*

It was the Black Hawk War of 1832 that gave the US government the most proximate impetus for its Indian Removal policy under Andrew Jackson. But forced Indian removal from their lands had long been de facto British, and later, American policy in one form or another. Jackson’s military participation in the Seminole Wars in Florida between 1816-1819, was but of a piece of this history. A Second (1835-1842) and Third Seminole War (1855-1858) would be fought, with related forced migrations of Seminole, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Cherokee tribes westward. As Paul Frymer has shown, “by the time of the Removal Act of 1830, the bulk of Indian removal had already occurred.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

The United States’ status as a white settler nation became a legal reality in 1841 with the Senate voting 37 to 1 to define settlers as “white.” [[34]](#endnote-34)

Much of American political thought on the question of US-Indian relations has been focused on the constitutional crisis created by Jackson’s refusal to adhere to Chief Justice John Marshall’s ruling to protect the legal status of Cherokee lands in the *Worcester v. Georgia (1832)* decision. Yet, the imbroglio over Indian rights invoked critical discussion over the nature of citizenship, the relationship of property rights to color, and the power of the government to make war against those it categorized as savage.[[35]](#endnote-35) In point of fact, the most benevolent public policy advocates of the period favored forms of relocation and colonization for indigenous and African peoples in the United States, creating the parameters of a nation favorably disposed towards, and engaging in, a republican form of ethnic cleansing. “It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity,” Alexis de Tocqueville observed at the time.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The greatest period of the expansion of democratic rights in the modern era, marked by universal (white) male suffrage, was thus enabled by a host of antidemocratic forms of exclusion. These included the exclusion of blacks, Indians, and women as full citizens; it also triggered state-directed removal policies and violence against Indians, black runaways (via the Fugitive Slave Law), and whites critical of the erection of this settlement nation. By 1851, the United States had reduced Indian Territory to parcels of land in what would become Oklahoma through the Indian Reservations Act. Coming 25 years after Cooper’s publication of *The Last of the Mohicans* – a novel whose title is evocative of, if not readily associated with genocide – it was a fulfillment of Jefferson’s “democratic” vision. Indeed, the American reservation system made plausible the idea that Native Americans would no longer be a visible part of civic life for anyone east of the Mississippi River, and perhaps anywhere else.

Indian removal, chattel slavery, and the perpetuation of female domesticity were all interlocking features of American westward settlement. Those voices in opposition, including that of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s, were unable to overcome the torrent of popular support for expansion. Nevertheless, Emerson argued in an 1838 letter to President Martin Van Buren, “You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Emerson was one voice among the transcendentalist movement to also vehemently oppose war with Mexico. Other writers were more oblique in their criticism, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, who elected to revisit white brutality against Indians in the context of his stories, including New England’s founding.

While women’s suffrage would make many of its initial gains in the western states in the second half of the 19th century, those political gains would not be advanced at the federal level; nor would many of those rights later conferred be achieved in other areas, including education, property, and status within families. With a few notable exceptions beyond Harriet Beecher Stowe, the success of “damned scribbling women” – Hawthorne’s flippant remark about the increased presence of women authors in America – was a late century phenomenon. Nevertheless, feminist, along with literary works began to dot the literary landscape, though few of these would attend to life beyond the gaze of white, middle, and upper-class women.

Tiffany K. Wayne has pointed out that the contributions of women to the transcendentalist movement and American intellectual history was far greater than is often depicted.[[38]](#endnote-38) Given that Transcendental thought emphasized the uniqueness of each individual in society, women thinkers and writers began with the arduous task of arguing for the individuality of women beyond their social function as wives and mothers, while at the same time engaging the broader philosophical questions of how reasoning members of society could at once belong to a state while ethically remaining apart from its political acts found to be antithetical to one’s conscience.

This intellectual independence ran counter to the government’s focus upon women, particularly white women, as maintainers of racial purity in western settlements, and their attendant role as guardians of civilization within the home.[[39]](#endnote-39) Westward expansion meant establishing Anglo culture in formerly native, Catholic, and Spanish territories, a challenge to prevailing notions of what constituted the best of the nation’s racial and cultural stock. Ironically, reordering the geographical and political landscape of the nation along western lines, meant returning to older, and more rooted notions of community, even as those communities were shaken by the new migration. Even the expansion of women’s suffrage in western states like Wyoming, carried an imperative of continuing the preferred racial order, as the lure of voting rights was offered to incentivize the settlement of white women in the western territories, thus staving off the possibility (likelihood) of interracial mixing.[[40]](#endnote-40) Such policies were part of a global, European colonial strategy.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The anthropologist Ann L. Stoler dubbed this new reality “the intimacies of empire,” the programmatic design of race and gender’s interplay in creating white settler societies.[[42]](#endnote-42) In this light, female domesticity is at once passive in relegating women to the home, while at the same time politically assertive, in that women were to play an active role in socially policing the sexual desires of white men (even as theirs was policed). American political thought, with rare exception, has not sufficiently examined the intellectual traditions of liberalism, as well as Christian thought, in excavating the socio-sexual dynamics of western expansion – the defining event of America’s economic and political transformation.

In speaking of the “Mexicanization of American politics” (an expression thankfully nearly out of vogue), historians and political scientists in the past have expressed a kind of gratitude for the nation’s having avoided the type of political instability that has episodically racked Mexico. But this expression also contains a separate seed of thought: namely that Mexico’s chaotic politics is in some ways owing to its mixed racial and cultural heritage – one that bespeaks to the perpetual need to guard against debasing incursions into the foremost of Anglo institutions – the family.

As Jill Lepore and others have pointed out, the Spanish “other” was an instrumental creation in establishing social and cultural parameters around the concept of “Englishness.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Likewise, in building an American empire, new social parameters were essential in erecting (or more properly, transferring) a preferred hierarchy into western territories. That this empire was in fact created at all, is perhaps more astonishing than the use of the old intellectual and political tools to build it. Much was betrayed in the exchange.

**Conclusion**

The components of the Compromise of 1850 are less familiar today than their cousins from the Missouri Compromise of 1820, but they are no less important to understanding the growth of American empire. Vast tracts of land that would later make up whole or parts of the states of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona, would upon being granted statehood, decide whether or not they wished to remain free, or become slave states. This notion of popular sovereignty, embedded within the idea that democracy could in fact be enacted to deny basic freedom to others, however counterintuitive, made great sense when viewed through the lens of republican expansion as racially contingent. Democracy and liberty had been for whites; it may, or may not be, depending on the political circumstances, for others.

But the Compromise went even further, stipulating that the Fugitive Slave Act was to be enforced by requiring citizens of free states to assist in the return of enslaved blacks who had made it into free territory. Such “fugitives” were also to be denied a trial by jury, further rendering a legal system already tilted against racial justice, a tool of racial oppression. While California was admitted into the Union as a free state, the nation’s capital, Washington, DC was allowed to continue slavery, while being compelled to no longer engage in its trade. The public face of democracy was to be kept as unblemished as possible, however increasingly difficult this had become.

These were the fruits of the Louisiana Purchase, western expansion, settlement, and the agreement to allow slavery into those territories where it had not previously been. This was Lincoln’s lawyerly argument against war with Mexico, and its predictable aftermath. Four years later, in the aftermath of another compromise – the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which ended restrictions against slavery above the 36’ 30 line established by the Missouri Compromise – Lincoln would reject the notion of popular sovereignty. “Our republican robe is soiled,” he said, “and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Unlike the radical abolitionists who had presumed the Constitution itself to be a compromise with evil, Lincoln thought it a sufficient conduit to channel more radical notions of liberty – read mainly through the Declaration of Independence’s commitment to human equality. He would not accept Chief Justice Roger B. Taney’s claim that the Constitution “was formed on the white basis.” The truth is, it had been so formed, and it was that fact that drove the better part of national political development in the 19th century. While Taney’s decision in Dred Scott was widely condemned as a scourge upon the best sentiments of American democracy at the time, the failure, both then, and now, is to reconcile the historical record supporting Taney’s understanding of the founding, with progressive political and social movements to redirect the nation’s republican identity. It is not only possible to believe Taney and Lincoln to be both right – it is essential to dispensing with the mythology of American exceptionalism – including one of its grandest myths – the nation’s growth as an “Empire of Liberty.”

The early political history of America was one of striking and intermittent re-orderings of the national political character. Moving from the Articles of Confederation to a federal republic with a powerful executive (1777-1787), a party-based democratic republic aspiring to a revolution of small, local representative governments, gave way to the vision of a large, powerful state whose expanse was of questionable ability for republican virtue to tame; and, then, an Empire of Liberty descended by degrees to one of conquest (1819-1848), racial internment (1830-1890), and creeping universal slavery (1830, 1850, 1854).

Like the story of the self-deluded protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the pace of American political development did not allow for self-reflection. For Brown, it was an “unconscious walk” into a dark abyss of sin – one filled with what Brown imagined to be grave dangers and evils – including the specter of “blood thirsty Indians.” But, Hawthorne knew better than to let Brown –and his readers of this classic 1835 short story – off so easily. It was Brown, after all, who in this tale of innocence lost, “was himself the chief horror of the scene.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

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