THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR
AND THE PROBLEM OF INEVITABILITY
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“THE quarrel which broke up the Union in 1860-1861 was about slavery. It had been gathering strength for a long time and at last erupted with elemental violence. The North and the South, divided by a moral issue of the first magnitude, the one detesting slavery, the other glorifying it as the basis of its social system, were unable to understand each other and the Civil War came as an inevitable result.”

This is a fair summary of what was once the view taken by most American historians of the origins of the great crisis of the sixties. The picture was presented in different colorings: all sorts of admissions or reservations were made and complications introduced. Nevertheless, this is in the main the impression that one will gather from Rhodes and Woodrow Wilson, from Channing and Morison, from Lord Charnwood, from James Truslow Adams, and from countless others.

For some time now this interpretation has been subjected to attack. First, the proposition that the quarrel was about slavery came under fire. Charles and Mary Beard, true to their system of economic interpretation, transposed the whole matter from the moral sphere to the sphere of the struggle of interests, and placed in opposition, instead of slavery and liberty, agrarian economy and capitalism, free trade and protection. Their view has had a profound influence, and rightly so, for
they emphasized phenomena which had not, indeed, been completely overlooked, but which had not received the attention which they deserve. It is only when they attempt to substitute the economic factor for the moral issue that one feels bound to part company with them. One notices, on looking critically at their argument, that they glide over the awkward fact that at the moment of decision the most powerful capitalistic interests in the North were all for compromise. One reflects that the hysterical excitement and self-glorification of the South can hardly be understood as a reaction to a merely economic menace, especially not as the country happened to be doing so well in a material sense. This mood cannot be explained except as the reply to a moral indictment. The accusation of the Abolitionists was such a painful hit because in it there spoke the spirit of the times. Behind that little group of fanatics there stood the silent condemnation of the free North, of Europe, of the world. By clinging to its “peculiar institution” the South cut itself adrift from the modern development of Western civilization, isolated itself in an obstinate and wilful self-righteousness, and fell under the spell of its wildest, blindest, and most reactionary elements.

A good deal more could be said about the economic thesis of the Beards, but the point that I propose to deal with in this essay is the other one on which for some time now the critics of the traditional interpretation of the origins of the Civil War have concentrated their energies, that of the inevitability of the conflict. Here the Beards did not depart from the tradition. To them the economic forces seemed to be as ineluctable as had the moral issue to their predecessors. Yet I think that their view, and the despiritualization of the whole episode which resulted from it, contributed to bring about the state of mind in which others soon proceeded to question the traditional presentation of an “irrepressible conflict.”

I shall not try to trace the emergence of the rival view that the Civil War was a mistake, which could have been, and ought to have been, avoided. I came across this new interpretation years ago in a little book that I picked up in the shilling box of
a shop in the Charing Cross Road in London, a somewhat irresponsible little book, but one which I found very illuminating, and which is indeed not only amusing but written with ability. It is *The Secession of the Southern States* (1933) by Gerald W. Johnson. I have never found it mentioned in any bibliography, but it has played a part in my education. "The fatalistic theory," Mr. Johnson writes, "grows more and more unsatisfactory to modern writers." And he goes on to quote from the well-known book by Dwight L. Dumond, *The Secession Movement* (1931): "That idea implies that the American people were incapable of solving a difficult problem except by bloodletting, and confuses the designs of party politicians with the art of statesmanship."

Many books have appeared since in which the period preceding the outbreak of war is studied, and in several this line of argument has been pursued. Prominent among them is, of course, the work of Avery Craven; but for the sake of clearness I shall concentrate on the writings of J. G. Randall, in which the thesis of the avoidability of the conflict forms a central theme. I shall deal mainly with the first two volumes of his *Lincoln the President* (1945), but shall also glance occasionally at his earlier work, *Civil War and Reconstruction* (1937), and at his volume of essays, *Lincoln the Liberal Statesman* (1947).

I admire the work of Professor Randall, and I am conscious of my own status as an amateur in the field where he is an acknowledged master. If I venture upon a discussion of his view, it is because I feel that his argument springs from a philosophy of history—or of life, for it comes to the same thing—against which I am tempted to pitch my own; and the more so as I have to do with a man who not only places a wealth of historical documentation fairly before his reader, but who presents his case with a vigorous and practised historical dialectic.

Randall detests the thesis of the irrepresible conflict and his work is a sustained attempt to refute it. He argues that we cannot do justice to the pre-war years if we will see them only in the light of the war we know was coming. There were expressions of antagonism no doubt, but if we compose our account
of the period preceding 1860-1861 by simply combining those, we subject the past to a mere literary device. One should not read back from the fact of war to the supposition that war-making tendencies were the nation's chief preoccupation in the fifties. "In those years shipowners were interested in the merchant marine, writers in literature, captains of industry in economic enterprise; if any class was concerned chiefly with factors of sectional antagonism it would seem to have been certain groups of politicians and agitators."

The warning that a period can be torn out of focus by interpreting it too resolutely with the help of the familiar outcome is one after my own heart, but that does not mean that criticism will have to disarm when looking at the actual practice.

No, Randall says elsewhere, there was no irreconcilable contrast between North and South. The very concept of two sections was an oversimplification. A further trick was played: the politicians and the agitators, in their pamphlets, their speeches, and their newspaper articles, pictured the two sections as hopelessly antagonistic. Yet there were influences making for peace; only, they attracted insufficient attention. Alarms tending toward war, on the other hand, whose appeal was not to reason, were loud and vociferous. Their menace was in a kind of emotional unbalance. Their language was that of name-calling, shibboleths, tirades. In that way normal life could be upset, and a conflict precipitated, that no majority in any section would have deliberately willed. "One of the most colossal of misconceptions is the theory that fundamental motives produce war. The glaring and obvious fact is the artificiality of war-making agitation."

There we have the thesis, and to establish it Randall marshals his evidence with inexhaustible energy and ingenuity. His material consists largely of incontrovertible facts. It is the great advantage of a mental attitude like his that it is perceptive of the rich diversity of life. Randall discerns an infinity of shadings where most historians had been content with clear-cut contrasts. He is himself very much aware of this. He refers repeatedly to his historical revisionism, although he prefers

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the terms “realism” or “historical restoration.” This latter word strikingly reveals his faith in the attainability of objectivity. He does not seem to realize that it is not the Civil War that emerges as a result of his revisions, but that, in spite of the undoubted finality of some of his fact-finding, it is still his Civil War and his Lincoln. His judgments of persons and of actions—and he works with judgments as well as with facts—are governed by a definite attitude of mind, the same in fact as that from which springs his thesis itself. Even incontrovertible facts can be used for arguments which are not equally acceptable to all of us.

It can readily be conceded that in no part of the country did there exist at any moment before the actual crisis a majority for extreme solutions. Lincoln’s two-fifths share of the poll of 1860 no doubt comprised a majority of the votes cast in the North, but Lincoln, for all that the South pictured him as the secret ally of the Abolitionists, consistently did what he could to reduce the conflict to the smallest proportions. Of the Northern electors who cast their votes for him, the large majority therefore never meant a pronouncement in favor of war, either to liberate the slaves or to establish an economic domination.

As regards the South, Breckinridge, the candidate of the extreme state-rights party, remained in a minority there compared with the aggregate of votes cast for his rivals. But Breckinridge himself was comparatively moderate: he never mentioned secession as did Yancey and Rhett. No more than the North, therefore, did the South pronounce in favor of secession in November, 1860. And when now suddenly, starting from South Carolina, the secession snowball was set rolling, it was because people saw in Lincoln’s election a victory of the spirit of John Brown and because they attributed to the new President the most evil designs against the South—because, in other words, people labored under grievous misconceptions.¹

¹ That the same might be said about the Northern people is brought out very clearly by David M. Potter in his Lincoln and his Party in the Secession Crisis (1942). Lincoln and the Republicans generally never took the secession talk in the South seriously; they looked upon it as blackmail. Not until the very last moment, well after the election at any rate, did they realize that the war danger was an awful reality.
At the same time, moreover, the opinion was propagated that the North would stand by inactively when the slaveholding states seceded. As a matter of fact, some Abolitionists had on occasion shouted for a separation from the immoral South, and there were moderates, too, who were prepared to say, with the old commander of the Union army, Winfield Scott: "Wayward sisters, depart in peace!" Yet it was an idea completely divorced from reality to think that the North would allow the Union to be broken up without resistance. The prospect had the immediate effect of causing the Northwest to feel itself one with the Northeast. It was an intolerable thought for those new regions that the lower course of the Mississippi, their main outlet to the outside world while the overland connections with the East were still defective, would come to be situated in foreign territory. But in the entire North, Union sentiment, quite apart from the feelings about slavery, was strong.

So it was fear, and at the same time it was illusion, that dominated men's minds in the South. But even so the secession had to be forced through in a manner which was denounced as dictatorial by its opponents. The convention of South Carolina refused to have its decision subjected to a referendum. Yet, once proclaimed, the secession immediately created ambitions and a loyalty of its own. Jefferson Davis, who had lately had leanings towards unionism and who had tried to put on the brakes at the last moment, nevertheless accepted the dignity of the presidency of the Confederation. Alexander Stephens, who had grumbled bitterly at the excitability of the crowd when in state after state the conventions were passing the secession resolutions (several against considerable minorities), let himself be elected Vice-President as soon as the issue was determined. In the slave states on the border, which were still sitting on the fence, feverishly discussing schemes of compromise and negotiating with Lincoln, it was only the shots fired on Fort Sumter which brought about the decision.

How different a picture can be constructed out of all these complications and divisions from that of the inevitable war arising out of a clear-cut contrast. One seems to discern all
sorts of sidepaths and ways out to a very different future from that of these four terrible years of war, followed by that miserable episode of Reconstruction. And the impression is strengthened when one looks more closely at the North after the rupture and observes how weak were the foundations of Lincoln’s position, in his own section, now that as War President he admitted no other aim than that of the restoration of the Union, that is to say of a continuation of the struggle down to the complete subjugation of the states in revolt. It is true that not all the criticism, not all the opposition which he had to endure, came from the moderates or the doubters. There were, too, the violent, the impatient. The Abolitionists now felt themselves carried along by the tide of events and urged and pushed Lincoln on. But the moderates and the doubters were a powerful party for all that. The accusation of the South, describing Lincoln as the despot trying by brute force of arms to do violence to free American states, found echoes in the Northern press and in the Congress at Washington. “Negotiate!”—was a loud clamour, not merely an underground murmur. After the early death in 1861 of Douglas, who had supported Lincoln’s view, the entire Democratic party in the North adopted that cry, and in 1864, when the presidential election came along, it looked for some time as if its candidate would win. In that case the fate of a country would have been entrusted to the man whose tenderness for the interests of the slave-holders had been a difficulty when Lincoln in 1862 contemplated his Emancipation Decree, the commander who had been suspected of not really wanting to beat Lee.

But why go on piling up instances and particulars? I am quite ready to concede the point. The American people had suddenly found themselves in the Civil War and the majority in none of the sections had deliberately willed it. But what does this prove? Does it prove that the war might therefore have been avoided? Is it not rather one more proof of the general truth that the course of history is not governed by the conscious will of the majority? Jefferson Davis was a believer in this truth. In 1864 two Northerners came across the lines under
a white flag and laid a proposal before the President of the Confederation—which had not, however, Lincoln’s sanction. They suggested that a truce should be concluded in order to hold a referendum, and that both North and South should promise to abide by the result. But Jefferson Davis was not interested. “Neither current events nor history,” he said, “show that the majority rules, or ever did rule. The contrary I think is true.”

And is not this indeed what we can read on every page of the book of history? Did the majority of the Netherlands people will the complete rupture with Philip II and with the Roman Church, the independence and the change of religion? Did they will these things in 1566, in 1572, in 1579, in 1581? There can be only one reply—even though we cannot for the sixteenth century as for the nineteenth rely on election statistics—: no. Did the majority of the English people will the overthrow of the monarchy and the execution of Charles I, in 1642, in 1649?—no. Did the French people will the Republic and the execution of Louis XVI? In 1789, in 1790, even in 1791, those who had ever thought of these developments as within the sphere of possibility must have been a tiny minority; but in 1792 and 1793 as well: no. Did the majority of the Belgian people in 1830 will the break-up of the union with Holland? Till the very last moment the leaders themselves spoke only of an administrative separation, but even when it happened—did they will it?—no. Did the majority of the German people in 1933 want Hitler, did they will war?—no. When the English people in 1939 took up the challenge of the Third Reich they already found themselves in a position of compulsion. Or if one wants to look at it from a different angle, one can say that the bulk of them had no notion yet of what they were letting themselves in for, and at any rate in 1940, when their eyes were opened, the position of compulsion was there beyond a doubt. But who does not remember the storm of cheers that greeted Neville Chamberlain and Munich in 1938, and not only in England, but in Germany, in France, in a country like Holland? The large majority wanted peace. “The ship-owner thought of his ships, the writer of his books, the manufacturer
of his machines.” Here, there and everywhere peace was what men wanted, “and the war came.”  

2 The instinctive aversion of the mass of people is no evidence that it might have been avoided. It is possible to believe—note that I am not saying, one can prove—that there were forces at work, stronger than individual desires or fears, or than their sum as resulting from the ballot box, which made it inevitable. How striking in this connection is the example of recent American history. I need hardly recall the way in which the United States entered both the First and the Second World Wars. This is a controversial subject, but to me it seems that in the light of his own country's experiences, Randall’s postulate of a strict majority democracy as a fixed standard of historical judgment comes to wear a somewhat ghostly look of unreality.

“Forces? indeed!” Randall will say: “Name calling, shibboleths, epithets, tirades.” An appeal, not to reason or to true interest, but to the emotions. And who will deny that sentiment, passion, extra-rational conviction, supply a fertile soil to the monster growths of misunderstanding and exaggeration, misrepresentation, hatred and recklessness! The question remains whether one is justified in labelling these extra-rational factors with contemptuous terms and deny to them, as Randall does, a rightful rôle in the drama of history, relegating them without further ado to the category of “artificial agitation,” which can on no condition be reckoned among “fundamental causes.”

Two histories might be written—so says the Count de la Gorce in his striking little book on Louis XVIII—about the Restoration. One would be the sober and serious history of the good services rendered by that régime to France from day to day and in an unsensational manner. The other one is the history of violent incidents, the execution of Ney, the expulsion of Manuel, et cetera, which, pictured in colorful prints, struck the popular imagination. And it is this second history which culminates in the revolution of 1830. You will notice here, in the writing of the French royalist, the same idea—merely indicated in passing however—, that the historian’s rational criticism,

2 To quote the words used by Lincoln in his Second Inaugural.
working after the events, can detach from the total of what happened the emotions which brought about the catastrophe and that in the other sequence he will retain the real, the proper history. The suggestion is at least that this ought to have been the real history.

Now this idea is the basic idea of Randall’s work. He constantly comes back to it. The Americans of the fifties both surprise and irritate him. An essay in which he recapitulates his grievances against them bears the title A Blundering Generation. How was it possible for these people to work up such excitement over trifles! All problems are distorted by them. Look how they made mountains out of molehills and exaggerated matters which seen in their true size would never have stood in the way of a peaceful settlement.

Take the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, with which Douglas in 1854 set going so fateful a controversy. Randall is much concerned to exculpate Douglas. Douglas is a man after his heart: a practical man, a man who wanted to do business, and with Northerners and Southerners alike. Can one wonder if Douglas was astonished at the hubbub? Was it such a crime that by his principle of popular sovereignty he created the possibility of slavery in those territories situated so far North? The very fact of the situation of Kansas and Nebraska made it most improbable that slavery would ever take root there. The raving in the North about a mere theoretical possibility was therefore, according to Randall, lacking in all sense of reality; it was an example of the hollowness of all that vehement quarreling.

But now let us try to picture to ourselves the state of affairs. Shortly before, in 1850, the new Compromise had been reached, intended to put an end to the dangerous tension that had been growing up over the disposal of the newly acquired Western lands. The Compromise was worthless if it did not confine the extension of slavery within limits accepted by both sides. But here in effect the demarcation line of 1820, which had been looked upon as fixed, was wiped out, among loud cheers from the South. Moreover, what dominated the situation was Southern fears of the rapid increase in power of the
North, and Northern suspicions that the South, to ward off that danger, was trying by all means to fasten its grip on the Federal Government. Must one not wilfully blindfold one's historical imagination in order to avoid seeing that the excitement was natural?

Besides, what happened? Had it been possible to apply the principle of popular sovereignty honestly, as doubtless Douglas had intended, then indeed neither Kansas nor Nebraska would have thought of introducing slavery. But the slaveholders from the neighboring slave states sent settlers with slaves to Kansas. A race developed between supporters of the two systems: a civil war in miniature. At last an unrepresentative, tumultuous, armed assembly passed a constitution with slavery and sent it to Washington. Douglas shrank from an approval which must have definitely alienated the North. In fact, the proceedings in Kansas were a mockery of his proudly proclaimed principle. His opposition to recognition roused much ill-feeling against him among the Democrats in the South, with whom he had all along wanted to strengthen the ties. Meanwhile "Bleeding Kansas" had become a new slogan to arouse the North. But, Randall reflects, why is it that "squatter sovereignty" came to be a source of confusion? "Not so much because of genuine conflict of local interests, but because a minority of trouble makers, aided by outside agitators, made turbulence rather than reasonable pacification their business." And that is probably a fair statement of the case. But it does not in the least affect the fact that, in the circumstances, and with the public temper prevailing in the United States at that moment, the principle introduced by Douglas could not but be a new occasion for quarrel over the old point at issue, and that his policy was therefore a capital mistake. Douglas had wanted to do business, but he had underestimated the inflammable state of public opinion concerning that great point which he had thought he could safely use for a bargain. "Morally blind" is the way Morison describes him.3

3 Allan Nevins entitles the chapter of his Ordeal of the Union in which he introduces the story of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill "Disaster: 1854." His account
In 1858, on the occasion of a senatorial election, the famous debates between Lincoln and Douglas were held up and down Illinois. Lincoln kept on, indefatigably, directing his attacks to the questions of Kansas, popular sovereignty, slavery in the Western territories. To Randall’s mind it is but a foolish business. There might have been sense in it if the speakers had at least discussed slavery in general, but Lincoln, as everybody knows, was as little prepared to interfere in the internal affairs of the Southern States as was his opponent. So the debates ran on slaves in those regions where there were hardly any and where there were not likely ever to be many slaves. Was this really the only subject on which to claim the attention, for weeks at a stretch, of the electors of Illinois and of the newspaper readers of the United States? Would not the time of the speakers have been better employed if they had dealt with problems like immigration, tariff, international policy, promotion of education?

This is indeed a striking instance of Randall’s somewhat masterful attitude towards his personages. In effect, he tells the speakers of 1858 what subjects they ought to have treated. Is it not the historian’s more obvious line simply to conclude from their choice, and from the enormous impression they made, that the country’s mood was strained to the utmost by the Kansas-Nebraska complication?

And this was indeed a great question. It did bring along, in
spite of what Randall says, a discussion of the slavery question itself. Some of Lincoln’s gravest, most profoundly moving utterances about the Negro’s fate were made in those speeches. Douglas attacked him over his phrase, “A house divided cannot stand,” in which he professed to read an incitement to civil war. Lincoln replied that he had only drawn attention to an undeniable danger. The generation of the Founding Fathers had believed that slavery was dying a natural death, so it had not been hard then to practice mutual forbearance and to compromise. Now, on the contrary, the slave power was full of self-confidence, or even of imperialistic ardor. Was not the recent verdict of the Supreme Court in the case of Dred Scott startling evidence of this? The Supreme Court, under its judicial mask, had always been a political body and it was now, after nominations by a succession of Southern Presidents, dominated by the Southerners. The split of the churches, too, was touched upon. It is as if Lincoln is polemising with Randall when he says that here at least it is impossible to suspect the hand of “the politicians” or “the agitators.” Furthermore he commented on the restraints on freedom of speech in the South, and on the Southern desire that the North should keep silent on slavery. But even silence was not enough. What they really wanted was express approval and admiration. The survival of democracy itself seemed concerned with the resistance to Southern arrogance; that is a point to which Lincoln frequently recurs. Does Randall in earnest want us to believe that the attention of Lincoln’s audiences was thrown away on questions like these?

Even the Fugitive Slave Law is, according to Randall, all things considered, but a small matter. And, indeed, one can say: were a few hundred fugitive slaves worth the risk of getting enmeshed in a destructive civil war? Answer: neither for the slave-holders, nor for the Northerners, who had to look on, on very rare occasions and in very few localities, when one was seized and forcibly carried back. Lincoln himself said that we must not act upon all our moral or theoretical preferences. “Ungodly,” he exclaimed sadly, when once he came into con-
tact with a case; "but it is the law of the land!" One can accept a personality in which were united deep moral feeling with caution, a sense of responsibility, and a capacity for weighing for and against in the scales of reason. But is it not just as understandable that a crowd assembled when a captured fugitive in Boston was taken to the harbor and that a battalion of soldiers and a war vessel had to be commandeered to see that the law was executed? The Southerners clung to the law because they desired to have from the North an acknowledgment of their right rather than because of the material advantage. A moral revulsion in the North soon made the execution impracticable, and this in its turn created bad blood in the South. Seen in this way—and it seems a truer way than the merely statistical one—, this was a considerable matter. It carried grist to the mills of the Abolitionists.

But Randall thinks himself entitled to brush aside the whole of that group as fundamentally insignificant—and here the Beards had set the example. Like the Beards he always points to their small numbers and to the fact that their extreme position excludes them from practical politics. Their only significance, and a baleful one, he sees in the exaggerated importance attached in the South to their periodicals and speeches. Misunderstanding once again. Later, when the war results in making them more influential and they finally help to decide the course taken by the North, he lays all stress on the disastrous effects of their intervention. Here again Randall is representative of a current in modern thought on these questions. The narrowness and cultivation of hatred of the puritan idealists during the Reconstruction period have given them a bad press with contemporary American historians. Nothing is more readily understandable. But should that lead us to overlook the dynamic strength which their ideas, in spite of their isolated position, showed in the prewar years?

Not more than a generation before the Civil War, slavery was accepted in the North itself and the black man was despised. There the first struggle had to be waged. In those years

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4 Nevins connects this immediately with the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.
the tendency in the North was to reassure the South on the great question, to meet it more than half way. The first Abolitionists, Lovejoy and Birney, had to endure violent persecution in their own North. It was in those days that Tocqueville wrote his *Démocratie en Amérique*, in which he shows so much concern about majority tyranny. Not without due cause, yet he seems now to have been lacking in a perception of the moral forces which defied that trend, often at the risk of being thrown into a river or hanged on a tree. There was something heroic about that struggle of a few men of conviction against their entire environment. Their ultimate success shows that it is not sufficient to count noses. It shows the incalculable influence which may be exerted by an idea, by conscience, by individual moral strength, by passion in the service of an ethical cause. It shows, too, that America formed a part of the great Western civilization which no longer tolerated slavery. The tremendous disturbance caused in American society by the question acquires a deeper meaning when this is clearly understood.

The spectacle of the dour fight put up by that small group of men, and even of the next generation who prepared for and lived through the Civil War, of Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Sumner, has a quality of greatness. I find encouragement in it. I know all about the unattractive characteristics of these men; the newer American books do not spare them. I do not my-

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5 Although this success stands in need of qualification. Even when the tide seemed to be running with the Abolitionists, there was in the North more fervor for abolition of slavery in the abstract than willingness to accept the Negro as a citizen on an equal footing. Indeed the Free Soil agitation in the West was largely due to fear of the black man’s low wage competition, and the lot of the free Negro was in most of the Northern states far from being a happy one. The Southerners were not entirely without justification when they railed at the element of hypocrisy in the attitude of their Northern critics, who moreover seemed to be forgetting the wretched conditions under which their own white factory workers had to labor. (F. Nevins, I, 518 ff.) The anti-Negro outbreak in New York at the height of the Civil War shows that actual contact between the races could still rouse ugly feelings in the North.

6 Nevins discriminates admirably between those amongst them who while attacking the institution of slavery refrained from reviling the slave-holders and the bitter spirits, so wrapped up in their feeling of rectitude or warped by their detestation of the black man’s wrong, that they seemed to take a pleasure in
self belong to their type and I have a keen perception, therefore, of the dangers which are inherent in it. Those heroes of the human conscience, who stand firm against the majority, and before whom the majority sometimes suddenly collapses, do not know half-measures. To expect of them that they should combine the championship of their idea with any conception of the relative advantages of what they attack, or only with a recognition of the innocence of those who defend the old order as their rightful heritage; to expect that they should be alive to the disastrous consequences of a sudden upheaval;—one may as well expect that the tiger will make his meal of grass.

Lincoln—yes. In Lincoln's case there is that rare combination of courage to stand alone with moderation; of detestation of the evil with understanding for the difficulties of the human agent or of the society in which the evil flourishes. But Lincoln was not an Abolitionist. He loathed slavery, but in abolitionism he perceived the defiance of the South and unconstituutionality. I admire that mentality and that temperament, but I wonder if with that alone, the spiritual revolution in the North, and the abolition of slavery in the South, could have been achieved. A foolish question, I admit, for how can abolitionism, even in the imagination, be eliminated from the situation?

Lincoln's relationship to the Abolitionists reminds a Dutch historian of that between William the Silent and the Calvinists. The Calvinists caused a great deal of trouble to William the Silent, and their activities had at times disastrous consequences. But how could anyone write a history of the revolt of the Netherlands, who saw in them nothing but eccentric enthusiasts, a minority, who did nothing but keep on foot an artificial agitation? One has to begin by accepting their conviction as a profound historic reality and their dynamic strength as an element in the situation, from which it cannot be eliminated even in the imagination. William the Silent, the

antagonizing Southern opinion. It was especially Garrison and Sumner who did a great deal of harm in that way, although again they were very dissimilar and Sumner at one time disapproved of Garrison's extremism. Ordeal of the Union, I, 144; II, 438.
master of expedients and of compromises, regarded them at first with disapproval and aversion. But when once the crisis had fairly set in, he could not do without their alliance. In fact, he was himself animated by so profound a sentiment that he was able to understand these men, and at times they were able to understand him. Nevertheless, he had every now and again to restrain them, mostly without result, and they paid him back with impatience, even with enmity. It was not until he was dead that his figure could be harmoniously integrated into the Calvinistic legend, so that in 1618 the forceful action of Maurice could be undertaken under the auspices of the murdered martyr's name.

All this can be applied to Lincoln and the Abolitionists. As long as there was a chance of a peaceable solution, which he pursued without sacrificing his detestation of slavery, he kept them at arm's length. When war had once broken out, he could not possibly do without them any more, but even now he resisted their attempts to get hold of him, to push and to pester him beyond his purpose. So he never became the man after their hearts. The more violent spoke of the President with impatience, with scorn and contumely, with contempt and hatred. They worked against him, they tried to encompass his downfall. But once he was murdered, immediately after the conclusion of the great struggle, and at the moment when his moderation, self-restraint, and capacity for seeing both sides, might have proved a blessing in the work of healing and reconciliation, then the Abolitionists, even those who had been blind to his greatness, began glorifying Lincoln as a martyr. Yet in the same breath they advocated and forced through a policy of hatred and of revenge, of humiliation and destruction of the vanquished South, a policy which was in the most flagrant contradiction of his spirit.

Many years previously, Lincoln—who was then a member of the Legislature of Illinois—had cast a look of concern on the turbulent conditions in what was in many ways still a primitive pioneer community. "Reason," he said, "unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support
and defence." A most characteristic utterance, and a noble utterance. As a directive for political action in a democratic community I know no proposition that is more worthy of being followed. But as a historian I know, too, that in its absolute form it lays down a rule which is beyond the capacity of man. Lincoln's own career furnishes striking proof that the fate of mankind is not from first to last governed by reason. Kind-hearted as Lincoln was, lover of a rule of law, given to consultation and give and take, he had to school himself for the task of leadership in a civil war of unheard-of ferocity. And being a man of full human capacity, he did not fail to draw the lesson.

In his Second Inaugural he reminded his hearers of the circumstances in which, four years earlier, he had spoken as President for the first time. Then all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. Both parties deprecated war, but, said Lincoln, the South tried to break the Union without war, while he himself had tried to save it without war. "And the war came." A peculiar and powerful interest had grown up in the South around slavery, an interest which strove after expansion. "All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war."—"Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. . . . Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding." "The Almighty has his own purposes."

It is in this speech that Lincoln, a month before he was assassinated, announced his intentions with respect to the vanquished: "With malice toward none, with charity for all"—this is still the best-remembered part. But the leading idea, expressed in religious terms, is that events had taken their course independently of human control. To me this humility in the face of the mighty happenings seems to be a truer proof of wisdom than Randall's rationalism. The conception in which it is founded may have its tragic implications; it has not, to anyone who accepts life in its entirety, anything depressing. What seems depressing is rather that attempt to
show, over and over again, that those people could have been spared all their misfortunes, if they had only been sensible. For do we not know at long last that man is not a sensible being? Moreover, the wisdom which Randall preaches to his fellow countrymen of three generations ago does not strike me as very convincing. Compromise; and when the seemingly final concessions have been made, for heaven’s sake make short work of the remaining scruples. The denial of contrasts which do not appear to have to do with the interest of the majority. The ignoring of moral facts. And, in short, crying peace where there is no peace. Could the conflict have been—I do not say postponed, but—solved in that way? One can easily imagine that out of a new Compromise, fabricated in 1861, after those of 1820 and 1850, in those feverish peace talks at Washington, a new crisis would soon have sprung, and, who knows, an even worse war.

There is one solution which, if one holds the bloodshed and the distress of the war to be worse than anything, could perhaps be more easily tried out in the imagination—I mean that of a peaceable separation. But it seems as if for American writers the overriding importance of the maintenance of the Union allows of no discussion. Even Randall, argumentative as he is, and filled with loathing for the war, assumes that paramount necessity implicitly as an underlying axiom. It would throw this essay out of proportion if I tried, at the last moment, to deal thoroughly with that question, but I will not omit touching upon it. It is difficult for a European to suppress the reflection that the difference in civilization between the North and the South might have supplied a basis on which to establish two separate political entities, and that perhaps in that way a more natural and a more harmonious development would have been possible, without the ill feelings resulting from friction in too close a contact, and without the subjection of the weaker party which followed in actual fact.7

Union sentiment was no doubt strong in the North and once

7 Nevins ends his second volume with a chapter entitled “Contrast of Cultures.”
the conflict had broken out it created the sense of sacred obligation. Lincoln felt from the first that an appeal to this principle would have a rallying effect on Northern opinion, and it might even make an impression in the South, while the abolitionist cry as a war aim would divide. The Dutch historian cannot help thinking of William the Silent, who for identical reasons kept *haec religionis causa* in the background and insisted on *haec libertatis causa*. For naturally the proposition that the revolt was undertaken for the sake of the Protestant religion must have a chilling effect on the Catholic majority. It was ever his contention, therefore, that the fight was being waged for the sake of liberty, for political reasons, in other words. In Calvinistic ears this almost sounded as sacrilege, just as Lincoln's emphasis on the Union motif roused the scorn of the Abolitionists. But Lincoln was not, of course, in speaking as he did, guided by tactical considerations alone. His heart was set on the Union. The thought uppermost in his mind was the failure and loss of prestige of the democratic idea everywhere that must follow upon the disruption of the one big democratic republic which then existed. That is indeed a great thought, and one is almost tempted to believe that it was inspired by a prophetic vision of our own times. The world rôle played by the United States today, and the rôle which no doubt it will be called upon to play in the future, would be impossible if the split of the sixties had not been averted. Lincoln was not the only one whose mind ran on these lines. The German-American Schurz and the French-American Laboulaye both said that the Union must be preserved and must be strong in order to uphold the cause of democracy in the world. On the other hand, the conservatives in Europe hoped for the disruption, because a united American continent would in the long run mean a power which they feared would make itself a universal nuisance. But if one asks, is the part in world affairs

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8 The fear is not so surprising when one remembers the overbearing tone and spirit as well as the actual violence which had of late years characterized American foreign policy. When conservative Europeans wished that the Civil War might lead to a permanent break-up of the Union (striking utterances are for instance to be found in a leading article of the London *Dispatch*, quoted by
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played by the United States today worth the sacrifices made by the generation of the Civil War; does it justify the subjection and permanent effacement of the South?—it is impossible to give an answer based on reason alone. Randall, therefore, convinced that he is proceeding critically and realistically all the time, constructs his argument from the bottom upward on a faith.

For the men of the sixties this too was a problem. A realization of that fact will intensify the feeling that the vision of "a blundering generation" does not do justice to the past. That vision belittles what had real greatness; it ignores the tragedy of that struggle with an overwhelming moral problem, slavery. For this was the struggle in which that generation engaged, after its fashion, that is to say after a human fashion. The problem was never posed in absolute purity, and it could not be so posed. The Southerners knew the practical difficulties of abolition; the Northerners had no constitutional right of interference. Union and state rights, and the whole concept of unity or of national diversity, were inextricably mixed up with the problem, and so were material interests on both sides. It is impossible, therefore, to say that in that painful crisis the South was wholly wrong and the North wholly right. This, too, Lincoln knew. In his Second Inaugural he represented the war as just retribution for the evil of slavery, but North and South shared the punishment, because the offence had come by both.

The two main points on which the conventional conceptions of the origins of the war have of recent times been criticized, as I said at the outset, are that of slavery as the central issue,

Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, ii, 68, or in Aus dem Leben Th. von Bernhardis, vi, 194), this does not necessarily denote sympathy with slavery or with an aristocratic slave-holding class. Gladstone's well-known utterance about Jefferson Davis having succeeded in creating a nation proceeded from a different line of thought altogether. I am inclined to regard it as meaning exactly what it said and as evidence of Gladstone's keen interest in national movements, however mistaken the application may have been in this case. See Paul, A History of Modern England, ii, 340. When the Beards interpolate in connection with Gladstone's indiscretion the remark that his "family fortune contained profits from the slave trade," they only reveal the dangers inherent in a preconceived opinion that everything must be explained by economic factors or motives of self-interest.
and that of the inevitability of the conflict. As regards the first, I have clearly enough expressed my opinion that neither with the one-sided attention to economic aspects of the Beards nor with Randall’s determination to reduce everything to exclusively practical and reasonable terms can the importance of the moral problem be done justice.

As regards the second, I want to guard myself against a possible misunderstanding. I have not been arguing that the war was inevitable, not even—for that is what the discussion is mostly about—in the ten years preceding the outbreak. I have been arguing that Randall’s argument in favor of the opposite contention is unconvincing. The question of evitable or inevitable is one on which, it seems to me, the historian can never form any but an ambivalent opinion. He will now stress other possibilities, then again speak in terms of a coherent sequence of causes and effects. But if he is wise, he will in both cases remain conscious that he has not been able to establish a definite equilibrium between the factors, dissimilar and recalcitrant to exact valuation as they are, by which every crisis situation is dominated.

And here I return to a point on which I find it possible to speak more positively. Randall’s way of distinguishing between fundamental and artificial causes seems to me inadmissible. With his impressive scholarship and keen intelligence, schooled in historical dialectic, he counts among artificial causes everything that does not agree with the wishes of the majority or with its true interests, defined by himself in accordance with the best rational standards. But in the sequence of cause and effect, of which the human mind will never have complete command, the category of the imponderabilia, passion and emotion, conviction, prejudice, misunderstanding, have their organic function. No doubt it is this very fact which makes that command unattainable for us, but we are not therefore entitled to ignore those non-rational factors or to argue them away with the help of wisdom after the event.