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American Exceptionalism And The Antebellum Slavery Debate

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AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY DEBATE

by

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ABSTRACT

American exceptionalism is the idea that America is or was somehow unique or different compared to other nations throughout history. Many Americans also believed that America had a special mission to be an example to the rest of the world. Many politicians and intellectuals have debated America's exceptionality since the founding of the country. The debate over American slavery during the antebellum era was in many ways a debate over American exceptionalism. Could America claim American exceptionality while they held on to slavery? George Fitzhugh, an ardent supporter of slavery during the antebellum period, argued that America was not exceptional and should accept slavery just like every other nation had throughout history. His counterpart Frederick Douglass disagreed vehemently and argued for an America that he saw as exceptional in its hypocrisy, but also exceptional in its founding if it could only live up to the ideals of the Founders. George Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All!* provided great insight into the anti-exceptionalist argument during this period. Frederick Douglass's speeches from 1841 to 1852 were used to analyze his American exceptionalist argument. These two individuals give us a case study of some of the core arguments for and against American exceptionality during the antebellum debate over slavery.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The basic human need to define one's self as part of a larger community is noted by historians who study nationalism. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* describes how individuals have come to identify themselves as part of a specific nation.[1] According to Anderson, the nation "is an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[2] He further expounds on this idea by stating, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[3] Americans have debated over the exact identity of their imagined community since its creation. The question of American exceptionality is a vital part of this debate.

The idea that America was or is somehow exceptional is a common theme that American intellectuals and politicians have put forward throughout history and continues to persist in scholarly debates. Historians tend to trace its origins back to the 17th century Puritans who left England to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New England area. Historians note that Puritans believed that they were starting a new experiment that would be an example to the rest of the world. The Puritans viewed their colony as the

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991). 1.
[2] Anderson, 6.
[3] Anderson, 6.

new Jerusalem and their leader John Winthrop as their Moses who would lead them to the promise land.[4] John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* sermon warned Purtitans that the world was watching them and they must fulfill their covenant with God.[5] If they did not then God would punish them and if they did keep the covenant then God would show his favor. Puritans ministers gave sermons that used current events of the day to prove that Puritans were keeping the covenant, or were not. If the Puritans were prospering then this was a sign that they had God's favor and if they were suffering then there must be sin among them. As the colonial period came to an end, this rationale fused with a secular tone among Americans who now envisioned themselves as part of a new world.[6]

Benjaimin Franklin's autobiography used American exceptionalist thought but he replaced religious providence with his secular Enlightenment views. The world could be understood through the principle of reasoning. If Americans acted rationally then they could take advantage of the unique circumstances they found themselves in. Americans did not have to worry about titles and monarchies and therefore could be a model to the world of a democratic government where one could have the opportunity to prosper because of America's unique situation. This secular prosperity was evidenced by how much you improved your lot in life. Franklin used his autobiography to show himself as an example of this and thought it was truly an American phenomenon.[7]

American exceptionalism then evolved into an idea that America is or was

[4] Madsen, Deborah. *American Exceptionalism.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 1-6.
[5] Hanover Historical Texts Project, Accessed 30 March 2014, http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html
[6] Madsen, 10-13.
[7] Madsen, 35-37.

somehow unique, uncommon, or qualitatively different than other nations, especially Europe.[8] The defining characteristics of this uniqueness are: American's rugged individualism, freedom of religion, egalitarianism, anti-statism, lack of socialism, and exemption from historical institutions such as feudalism and the monarchy.[9] Due to its perceived uniqueness, America viewed itself as a model to the rest of the world in the political, economic, and social arena.[10] Historically Americans were highly influenced by this type of thought.

This discussion of American character among intellectuals and politicians has historically become more hotly debated during times of impending crisis or transition. The American Revolution marked one the first crises in American history where there was no clear consensus on if the colonies should break away from England. Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* in 1776 with the goal of introducing a plan of how the American colonies could forge their own future without the need for a king. Paine made a forceful argument that a monarchy was not needed and was indeed a sin that started with the Israelites who clamored for a king until God finally relented and gave them Saul.[11] Paine then made a provocative and persuasive argument that America was exceptional and should break away from England and be an example to the rest of the world. Between 120,000 and 150,000 copies of *Common Sense* were in circulation within a year of its publication, unheard of in its time. George Washington called

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[8] Seymour Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996) 18.
[9] Lipset, 19-26; David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 19-22.
[10] Lipset, 18.
[11] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense.* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 8-12.

Common Sense 'unanswerable' and found it to be 'working a wonderful change in the minds of many men.'[12] Thomas Paine was able to convince many Americans that breaking away from England was their best course of action and he convinced them by arguing for America's exceptional place not only in the world, but also in history.

Although America had gained its freedom and set off on a mission to establish a unique nation devoid of despotism, it was not lost on the founders that slavery posed a severe threat to the new democratic republic. The historian William Freehling noted that the Founding Fathers did want to see a nation free of slavery but were constrained by racism and the financial realities of emancipating slaves. According to Freehling, Thomas Jefferson was the embodiment of these conflicting views on slavery. Jefferson was not overtly racist by the standards of his day but did believe blacks had certain inferiorities. He made attempts to keep slavery out of the new western territories while he could not bring himself to free his own slaves because of his massive debt.[13]

His *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) gives us some insight into his worries about the peculiar institution. In his comments about the customs and manners of Virginians, he gave an alarming prediction of what would happen to America if it did not eventually rid itself of slavery. Jefferson did not see an immediate crisis on the horizon but did see slavery as antithetical to the democratic values he and the other Founding Fathers had espoused in their fight for freedom. He pondered:

> Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an

[12] Robert A. Ferguson, "The Commonalities of Common Sense," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol.57, No.3 (July 2000) 466.
[13] William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No.1, (February 1972). 81-87.

exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.[14]

He could not see how a democratic republic and slavery could co-exist in the long term. Jefferson wanted to avoid this eventual crisis by gradually ending slavery. The North slowly phased out slavery throughout the first half of the nineteenth century but this did not result in avoiding an eventual crisis that Jefferson had foreseen almost ninety years before it came to fruition.

No greater crisis has ever faced America than the Civil War. The 750,000 deaths during the Civil War are almost as much as all other American wars combined.[15] The American physical landscape, especially the South, was devastated while the social order of life dramatically altered when the slaves were emancipated.[16] Historians now generally agree that the antebellum debate over slavery was the central cause of the war.[17] In a sense, the debate over slavery was really a debate about American exceptionalism. Was America exceptional? If so, who was allowed to enjoy the characteristics that made up this exceptional society? If not, what exactly was America and what ideology should it follow?

Dorothy Ross's *The Origins of American Social Science* takes an in-depth look into the overwhelming influence that exceptionalist thought had on the emergence and development of American social sciences from the mid-nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century but she also points out the prevalence of this thought in the

[14] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 174-175.
[15] David J. Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History,* Volume 57, No. 4 (December 2011) 1.
[16] Dan Monroe and Bruce Tap, *Shapers of the Great Debate on the Civil War* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005) xiii.
[17] Peter Kolchin, *A Sphinx on the American Land* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 2003) 16.

antebellum political and intellectual arena. She states:

> Exceptionalism did constitute the predominant language of politics. It became a presumptive consensus, if not a consensus in fact, deriving its normative force both from its dominant position in political discourse and from its roots in national ideology.
> As a national ideology, American Exceptionalism was an intellectual construct, the work of cultural and political elites, and hence it had to be propagated, learned, and accepted by the diverse strata of American society. Moreover, as the dominant framework of politics, it did not so much define agreement as stimulate conflict.[18]

The conflict, according to Ross, was over exactly how to realize this exceptionalist vision for antebellum America, but that was only part of the conflict.[19] The other aspect of the conflict was that not everyone agreed with the concept of American exceptionality and thus the debate over American slavery became the greatest stage during the antebellum period for these conflicting views of American identity to be expressed and articulated.

Two prominent men of the antebellum period weighed in on the debate, representing both ends of the slavery argument spectrum. For the proslavery side no one was more extreme in his defense of the peculiar institution than George Fitzhugh. Fitzhugh was a proslavery theorist and propagandist who started to publish proslavery writings during the late 1840s and developed these ideas into two books. *Sociology for the South* was published in 1854 and was followed up by *Cannibals All!* in 1857.[20] Fitzhugh took the proslavery argument to its extreme conclusion and championed slavery not only for African Americans but for some whites as well.

The polar opposite was Frederick Douglass. Frederick Douglass, who is known as one of the greatest orators of the nineteenth century, argued vehemently for the rights of

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[18] Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 29.
[19] Ross, 29-30.
[20] Harvey Wish, *George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1943; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962).

African Americans to enjoy the same freedoms as whites. Douglass was a former slave who escaped to freedom in 1838. He used his new found freedom to champion the cause of abolition throughout the antebellum period. He wrote autobiographies, made thousands of speeches, and launched his own newspaper to express his views on slavery.

This thesis will prove that through George Fitzhugh and Frederick Douglass's writings and speeches we see the highly charged debate about slavery during the antebellum period but more importantly we see a debate about America's identity couched in terms of American exceptionalism or the denial of such exceptional status. Fitzhugh argued for an America that he saw as unexceptional and a country that should accept its ties to a more conservative past. Frederick Douglass, on the other hand, did believe in American Exceptionalism but believed in two different forms of it. He believed in an America that was exceptionally hypocritical during his early years in the antislavery movement, but as he distanced himself from the Garrisonians, he also started to believe in an America that was exceptional in its inception and was on an exceptional trajectory to realize its true calling, if slavery could be abolished.

These two individuals' arguments symbolize three different strains of the American exceptionalism argument. One denies that America was ever exceptional. The second points out that America is exceptionally bad or hypocritical. The third type of argument casts America in a more positive light by noticing America's exceptional past and its unique mission that it still needs to fulfill.

The debate has continued among intellectuals into current scholarship. Modern scholars debate whether or not America is exceptional to compare America to other

nations in the present and from the past. The more subtle reason they debate American exceptionality is to define what America was, what it currently is, and what the future might hold. One need look no further than Cullen Murphy's 2007 work *Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America.*[21] Murphy compares the two superpowers and finds striking similarities that might point to American decadence, which might lead to America's eventual demise. This need to define American identity also is traced to some type of impending crisis or transition in American life. September 11th brought significant transition to American life and Murphy saw the event and the aftermath as possible signs of an America that was on the decline.

If we look back to the post World War II era we see that the historiography of the 1950s was dominated by the "consensus school" led by Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America.* Hartz argued that America always had a "liberal consensus" based on the escape from the European past. He contended that America had an absence of a feudal or socialist tradition. [22] He did have to deal with the fact of slavery and referred to Southern proslavery defenders as reactionaries that tried to subvert liberalism but could not "break out of the grip of Locke."[23] The 1970s ushered in severe criticism of the concept of American exceptionalism. Some historians claimed America was no longer exceptional while others claimed that it never had been. The calamities of Watergate and Vietnam influenced the former while historians who did not believe in American exceptionalism pointed to the fact that African Americans had no part in this "exceptional history." It is apparent that the civil rights movement had a large impact on this

[21] Cullen Murphy, Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America(New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
[22] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1955) 1-30.
[23] Hartz, 177.

position.[24]

The early 1990s saw a reemergence of the argument over American exceptionality. The end of the Cold War also influenced scholars to try and define exactly what America was and what the future would look like without its former foe.[25] The frequent theme that is prevalent throughout these scholarly debates is a time of looming crisis or transition, which influences Americans to contemplate who they are and therefore try to promote a vision of America that embraces American exceptionalism or a vision that denies its existence and calls for its rejection.

Is America exceptional, or should academics accept that no country is exceptional? This has been debated extensively and will continue to be debated. This work is not meant to answer that question. There are far more qualified academics who should attempt to answer that question, though I suspect no one will ever have the final word. The rhetoric of George Fitzhugh and Frederick Douglass does not help to answer these questions. They do, however, crystallize the two sides of the American exceptionalism argument within the antebellum slavery debate. More recent historians have shifted more focus on how American politicians and intellectuals used American exceptionalistic rhetoric instead of trying to prove or disprove American exceptionalism, though not all.[26] Literary works of the 19th century along with contemporary figures like Oprah Winfrey are analyzed to determine how exceptionalist language is used to further their position. This work is an attempt to add to the literature that analyzes these

[24] Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," *American Quarterly* 45, no.1 (Mar, 1993): 11-13.

[25] For a collection of essays on this debate consult Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[26] Jason A. Edwards, "An Exceptional Debate: The Championing of and Challenge to American Exceptionalism." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* Vol.15, No.2 (Spring 2012).

exceptionalist arguments in a historical context.

The antebellum debate over slavery was a platform for the debate over American exceptionalism during a period where Americans could see arguably the greatest crisis in U.S. history on the horizon. George Fitzhugh and Frederick Douglass provide us with the core strains of this argument. They exemplify how differently Americans viewed their past and their identity. Douglass himself shows how even one individual could encompass changing and different views of American identity within his or her lifetime. Fitzhugh gives us a view of how sharp the proslavery critique of American exceptionalism could be, but he went further than most of his proslavery colleagues were willing to go. He was willing to take the proslavery argument to its logical conclusion. If slavery were compatible with democracy and American values, then why would Southern whites only accept slavery for blacks? This makes Fitzhugh's argument one of the most compelling on the proslavery side. The debate over American exceptionalism continues to the present and these two individuals provide us with a fascinating case study of the main arguments put forth to refute or promote American exceptionalism during the antebellum era.

CHAPTER II

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: EARLY YEARS OF EXCEPTIONALIST RHETORIC

The term exceptional many times is used to describe America in a positive light but Frederick Douglass did not view America as an exceptionally good country, at least in his early years of the antislavery movement. He instead saw America as exceptionally hypocritical in its pretensions of freedom and equality for all. He chose to attack American slavery by noting all the facets of American identity tinged with hypocrisy due to slavery. By contrasting Americans' ideals with the reality of southern slavery, Douglass was able to highlight just how exceptionally hypocritical Americans were when it came to American slavery.

Religious freedom, individualism, equality, and a lack of a monarchy had always been a part of an American exceptionalistic argument as a unique experiment of freedom and liberty. He took these key components of American life that were thought to be what made America exceptional and emphasized how African Americans were systematically denied the right to partake in these perceived exceptional qualities. In addition, he contended that America was the most exceptionally hypocritical country in the history of mankind because it championed these ideals the loudest while slavery continued to thrive and even expand. This rhetoric continued throughout his earlier years in the anti-slavery movement until he broke away from the Garrisonians and evolved in his thinking on

many different issues of the day.

Frederick Douglass was a prodigious writer and speaker who left plenty of material for historians to analyze. The National Historical Publications and Records Association started a project in the early 1970s to collect all of Douglass's known documents and publish them for public access. We are in the year of 2014 and the project is still not complete. The focus of this scholarly work is Douglass's rhetoric and so the sources used are primarily his speeches from 1841 through 1852, along with his autobiographies. Douglass always believed that speech was the most effective means to communicate and agitate for his cause. Douglass spent many hours preparing his speeches and had a strategy for each speech he gave. Any ideas Douglass put forth in public speeches were well thought out in advance and he knew exactly what audience he was speaking to, what points he wanted to convey, and the technique he wanted to employ. The same could be said of his autobiographies. He used these specific platforms to tailor his American exceptionalism message to each audience.

Historians over the years have had different views of abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass. The first half of the twentieth century was a time when many historians created the narrative that abolitionists were extremists who should have allowed Americans the time to gradually allow slavery to dissipate instead of demanding something Americans were not yet ready to do. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips is considered in many ways to be one of the most influential historians for this type of thinking. He focused more on Southern slavery and thought that slavery was a benevolent, although an unprofitable institution, that would have ended without abolitionists' interference.

He saw abolitionists as fanatics that pushed the country into a needless war.[27]

Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond were graduate students who studied under Phillips but came to the conclusion that Phillips may have been wrong about abolitionists and may have been too quick to dismiss them. Up until this point, most studies on abolition focused heavily on William Lloyd Garrison and his followers. Barnes and Dumond shifted their focus away from the New England theater and more on abolitionists in New York and further West such as: Theodore Weld, the Tappan brothers and James G. Birney. Their shift in focus led to further criticism of Garrison while noting the influence that other abolitionists had.[28] Dumond's interest in the Western and New York abolitionist also led him to believe that it was the South that was too irrational and caused the crisis to escalate into the Civil War. Southern historians, such as Frank Owsley and E. Merton Coulter countered with [29]their own revisionist history that blamed the abolitionists completely and defended the South.[30]

The 1960s did bring some change from progressives who wanted to revisit abolitionist history and cast the abolitionists under a more positive light. The argument of whether or not abolitionists were reckless faded. The Civil Rights movement coincided with this trend to portray abolitionists as reasonable people who used many different methods to abolish slavery. Historian Merton Dillon hypothesized that many historians of the 1960s found it much easier to relate with abolitionists because of the similar tactics used by

[27] Stanley Harold, *American Abolitionists.* (New York: Pearson Education, 2001), 5-6.
[28] Betty L. Fladeland, "Revisionists vs. Abolitionists: The Historiographical Cold War of the 1930s & 1940s" *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol.6, No.1, (Spring 1986): 1-3.
[29] See: Dwight L. Dumond, *AntislaveryOrigins of the Civil War in the United States.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
[30] Fladeland, 9.

abolitionists and Civil Rights activists to further their cause.[31] James M. McPherson argued that abolitionists did act with moral fervor but also understood the realities that came with abolishing slavery.[32]

The late 1960s into the 1970s brought forth other questions such as the role of African Americans and women in the abolitionist movement. Benjamin Quarles's *Black Abolitionists* noted that racism was a large part of the dynamics between white and black abolitionists, and it also hampered the effectiveness of the movement. Historian Blach Glassman Hersh reviewed the rise of the women's suffrage movement by analyzing women activists involved in the abolitionist movement.[33] Dwight L. Dumond's 1930's argument that Garrison was not as influential as previous historians had thought eventually led to the inclusion of a range of personalities in abolitionist literature.

Many historians throughout abolitionists' literature still point to William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, which was published in 1831, as the beginning of the abolitionist movement. This presumed that whites dominated the abolitionist movement and that they allowed African Americans to be a part of it. More recent work suggests that African Americans were organizing for abolition as early as the American Revolution. This new argument points out that African Americans played a key role and were not just followers. It is also noted that the abolitionist group was not a monolithic group that agreed on the means or the end. This is especially true among black

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[31] Merton L. Dillon, "The Abolitionists: A Decade of Historiography, 1959-1969" *Southern Historical Association* Vol.35, No.4, (Nov 1969): 501-510.
[32] Dillon, 513.
[33] *Elizabeth Pleck review of* The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America by Blanche Glassman Hersh*;* Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869 by Ellen Carol DuBois. *The GreatLakes Review*. Vol.6, No.1 (Summer, 1979): 102-105, accessed 30 March 2014. *http://www.jstor.org/stable/20172500*

abolitionists.[34]Frederick Douglass, if examined closely, is a prime example of the heterogeneous nature of the abolitionist movement. He started his career under the tutelage of William Lloyd Garrison and in many ways echoed the beliefs of Garrisonians who believed in immediate abolition of slavery, women's rights, peaceful agitation, anti-colonization, and no direct participation in the political arena, to name a few. As Douglass ventured overseas and met other prominent abolitionists such as Gerrit Smith, Douglass demonstrated how the abolitionist argument could change and differ over time and space. Douglass also represented how African Americans played a key role in developing the antislavery argument. His views of American exceptionality and his use of this rhetoric gives historians insight into how the antislavery argument could evolve over time.

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in 1818. His birthplace was in the county of Talbot, Maryland where his master Captain Aaron Anthony resided. There is some dispute over what year Douglass was actually born due to slave owners not always keeping legitimate records. Most historians recognize him as one of the greatest orators of the nineteenth century and one of the leading figures in the debate over American slavery. He escaped from slavery in 1838 and became a member of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. He then went on to make thousands of speeches, write three autobiographies, and edit many newspapers all in the effort to end slavery. This gave him a prominent platform to speak from and allowed him to meet with leaders such as Abraham Lincoln who called Douglass his friend. Douglass went on to hold different political appointments during the years after the Civil War. He also continued to publish

[34] McCarthy, T. P. & Stauffer, J.(Ed.) (2006). *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism.* New York: The New Press. ix-22.

his newspaper, which by that point was called the *New National Era*. His whole life was devoted to abolishing slavery and furthering the cause of African Americans after slavery was abolished.[35]

Frederick Douglass initially joined the American Anti-Slavery Society after attending one of their conventions in Nantucket in August, 1841. According to William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass was asked by a friend to address the people at the meeting since Douglass had experienced the evils of slavery first hand. After Douglass's speech, Garrison convinced Douglass to join the society and to lecture at all the major events. From this time onwards Douglass began to perfect his craft as a speaker and writer.[36]

Frederick Douglass believed that lectures were the most effective way to promote the anti-slavery cause. He gave over 500 speeches between the 1841 and 1846 alone.[37] His speeches were typically two hours in length but this was not unusual for most nineteenth century speakers.[38] He used a plethora of techniques to get his point across to his audience. He started many of his speeches by stating how unqualified he felt to be in front of the audience, which allowed his audience to relate with him. He often used humor and wit to keep the crowd engaged but guarded against too much humor and storytelling because he didn't want the audience to become distracted from the main message he was trying to convey. One of his most famous ways to receive a laugh was to mimic pro-slavery politicians such as John C. Calhoun. He often used his opponents' words against them and pointed out the absurdity of their statements. The historian John

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[35] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1841-1846). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, Volume 1., xi-xii.
[36] Blassingame, xxi.
[37] Blassingame, lxxi.
[38] Blassingame, xxviii.

Blassingame referred to this technique as "*eduction ad absurdum* or reduction to absurdity."[39] He used these techniques along with a larger than life voice and presence to sway his audience.

His audience varied in their praise and criticism of Douglass's speeches. During Douglass's time he was not always considered to be the most talented orator among his peers. Frederick Douglass did receive high remarks from professors, politicians, and newspapers of the day such as the New York Tribune, The New York Sun, and other leading newspapers of the day. There were, on the other hand, critics of Douglass. Many thought he was too harsh on Americans and too hyperbolic. Much of the criticism came from Northerners who also criticized Garrison and other abolitionists but specifically disliked Douglass because of his race. The most surprising and severe critics were other African Americans. Many of the free black leaders of the North disliked Douglass's positions on colonization, separate black churches, and were particularly troubled by his unwavering attacks against American religion.[40]

Whether he was liked or disliked, no one can dispute that Frederick Douglass was one of the most influential people to weigh in on the slavery debate. It is through his carefully written speeches that we are able to extract his core arguments about many topics including colonization, women's rights, religion, politics, and, most importantly, slavery. If we analyze these speeches more closely we can also see how he used the concept of American exceptionalism to argue against American slavery by highlighting the exceptional hypocrisy he felt Americans displayed when it came to slavery. He

[39] Blassingame, xxxi-xxxii.
[40] Blassingame, xxxvii-xl.

continually pointed out that America was exceptionally awful, especially when it came to the gap between the professions of American ideals and the reality of African Americans. This exceptionalist argument is prevalent throughout his early speeches all the way up to his change of opinion on the constitution.

Frederick Douglass became part of the abolitionist movement just when the political climate was starting to intensify on the subject of American slavery. 1835 was a landmark year that saw the South inundated with antislavery mail. Southerners, even from the states that were trying to slowly eradicate slavery, were taken aback by the flood of mail and saw it as a ploy by abolitionists to drive slaves to revolt. Even President Andrew Jackson had to get involved to calm southern outrage. This was followed up shortly by the U.S. Congress receiving an avalanche of anti slavery petitions. The infamous "Gag Rules" were implemented by the Congress to try and stifle antislavery dissent. The "Gag Rules" were challenged by John Quincy Adams until they were finally lifted in December of 1844.[41] Frederick Douglass had read about John Quincy Adams and the congressional debates about the antislavery petitions while he was still a slave.[42] This was the political scene as Frederick Douglass started his journey to end slavery in the early 1840s.

Of course, Douglass did not believe in using electoral politics to fight against slavery. Douglass was closely tied with Garrsionians who did not believe that the United States had a legitimate government since it was founded upon and perpetuated by slavery. Garrisonians believed that the only true government they were responsible to was that of

[41]William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion, vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854 (New York, 1990). 287-351.
[42] James Oakes, The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics (New York, 2007). 6-7.

God. They saw their mission as a journey to end slavery and restore peace and order to earth again, thus realizing the millennium. They did not believe this could be accomplished either through electoral politics or through violence.[43] In Douglass's early speeches he tended to follow this line of thinking. Indeed, Douglass would challenge other more militant blacks such as Henry Highland Garnet who was more likely to promote violence as a tool to end slavery.[44] Instead, he used the Garrisonian tactic of moral persuasion in his early speeches.

Douglass was also influenced by Garrison when it came to the critique of American churches. Douglass attacked not only southern churches that allowed slavery to continue in their midst but also castigated the Northern churches who continually discriminated against blacks. Douglass framed both Northern and Southern churches as exceptionally hypocritical. He used America's belief in freedom of religion to show that its own religious institutions were not promulgating freedom but instead propping up despotism. Douglass argued the South used the institution of religion to sanction slavery while the North didn't see anything odd about blacks relegated to separate seating on Sunday morning.

From 1841 until 1844 Frederick Douglass gave all his speeches primarily in the New England area. One of his first speeches addressed religion specifically. In Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841 Douglass gave a speech titled *American Prejudice and Southern Religion*. He did not use the speech to outline the many injustices found in Southern slavery. To the contrary, he scolded the Northern churches

[43] Lewis Perry, Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought (London: 1973). 55-91.
[44] James Oakes, The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics (New York, 2007).10.

for not upholding equality and allowing racial prejudice to pervade throughout every Sunday meeting. He told a story of how he used to be a Southern Methodist who worshiped in the same church as whites even though he was a slave. He then contrasted this image with one of his first experiences in a Northern Methodist church. He explained that the white members were allowed to take communion first while blacks had to wait until all whites had been served. The minister then called the blacks of the church forward and said, "you know God is no respecter of persons!"[45] Douglass used this imagery to point out the hypocritical thoughts Americans had about slavery and prejudice. It was not a Southern problem in Douglass's mind but an American problem. He saw the American church as the "bulwark" of American hypocrisy.

In this same speech Douglass used humor to tell the story of a young lady who had made it to heaven and came back to earth. The lady was asked if she saw any blacks in heaven and the lady replied that she did not make it to the kitchen.[46] He used Christianity's belief in an afterlife to show that even in heaven blacks needed to have their proper place in the minds or sub-conscious of most Americans. Douglass was pointing out how strong prejudice was in the North, while at the same time using America's belief in religious freedom against them by showing that blacks were not allowed to enjoy this unique religious freedom that could only be found in a place like America.

The disdain for American religion was something that Douglass most certainly heard from Garrison and this did influence the antislavery speeches of Douglass.[47]

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[45] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1841-1846). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, Volume 1., 10-11.
[46] Blassingame, 12
[47] James Oakes, 9-10.

Garrison would often introduce resolutions at these antislavery meetings that condemned the American church and clergy before Douglass would give his speech. What should also be noted is that Douglass used his own personal experience in many of these speeches to depict the exceptional hypocrisy of American religion when it came to slavery. Garrisonian doctrine was not the only reason Douglass made it a point to consistently attack the American church. Douglass was not just repeating what his colleagues were espousing but genuinely believed that the American church was one of the main reasons slavery was allowed to prosper based on his personal experience.

Frederick Douglass went on to publish his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845).* The book gave an autobiographical account of Douglass's life as a slave but it also developed certain themes about American slavery. He was able to express the physical brutality of slavery in a personal way. More importantly he was able to explore the psychological and emotional issues that were the consequence of American slavery. The themes of American religious hypocrisy and no equality of opportunity were present throughout Douglass's account.

He used the story of his master Thomas Auld's religious conversion to display the hypocrisy of religion among Southerners. Douglass held out a small hope that his master would free his slaves after being converted but described how his master in many ways became more cruel after Mr. Auld's conversion. Douglass noted how slave masters, including Mr. Auld, would use the scripture to justify beating slaves who did not obey. Douglass also described how his master would pray for material blessings while Mr. Auld would allow his own slaves to go hungry even though there was food available.

His master was not just any Christian convert but was considered one of the leaders of the church who regularly had ministers over for dinner at this house. Douglass's personal account showed the hypocrisy of Southern religion and demonstrated that it was supported by the leaders of the church.[48]

Douglass also told the story of how he learned to read and write. Mrs. Auld initially took it upon herself to teach Douglass how to read but was eventually scolded by Mr. Auld who was extremely upset that any slave would be learning to read. Mr. Auld thought that no good could come from slaves learning to read. He thought that slaves would only grow more discontent because of this. Mrs. Auld changed her tone and no longer taught Douglass and actually took every precaution to make sure that he was not learning to read on his own. Douglass did eventually teach himself how to read and write without the help of Mrs. Auld. Douglass used this story to express the inequality of American slavery and how Southerners went against their own natural instinct of equality of opportunity. According to Douglass, Mrs. Auld had never been directly in charge of a slave before and instinctively treated Douglass no differently than the white children. Mr. Auld represented how American slavery could corrupt this initial instinct. Douglass painted a picture of American slavery that was in direct contrast to individual freedom and equality, which was what Americans prided themselves in. Instead of promoting equality of opportunity Americans were denying the basic right of education that would allow blacks to possibly succeed. These two different stories in Douglass's

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[48] Library of Virginia, Electronic Text Center. *Douglass, Frederick, 1817?-1895. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* http://web.archive.org/web/20110116090026/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=DouNarr.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=10&division=div1. 1 March 2014.

autobiography attacked American religious hypocrisy and pointed out the lack of equality for blacks.[49]

The publication of his autobiography led to increased attention on Douglass – much of it hostile- and many abolitionists, including Garrison, believed Douglass needed to leave the country for a while until tensions dissipated. It was decided that Douglass would go to Ireland and he arrived in Ireland in August of 1845. He was met by members of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society, which had close personal ties with the Garrisonians.[50] Douglass was treated somewhat like a celebrity among the Irish. Newspapers in Ireland generally remarked about the multitudes that turned out to hear Douglass speak.[51]

At first he continued to critique the American church but the tone changed slightly. He started to place America within a larger context of the world and human history. This was in part due to Douglass speaking to a European audience but it also had to do with the fact that for the first time Douglass was outside of the United States and saw how blacks were treated in Ireland in comparison to America. He often recounted how he was treated as an equal in Ireland and most of Europe that he traveled through. Most of the churches received him with open arms. For the first time, Douglass was received as a man.

In a barrage of speeches delivered in Cork, Ireland in October of 1845, Douglass

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[49] Library of Virginia, Electronic Text Center. *Douglass, Frederick, 1817?-1895. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* http://web.archive.org/web/20110116085915/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=DouNarr.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=7&division=div1. 14 March 2014

[50] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1841-1846). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, Volume 1., 34.

[51] John W. Blassingame, 39,45,55,59

further expounded on the exceptional evils of the American church. In his speech entitled: *I Am Here To Spread Light On American Slavery,* Douglass again critiqued Southern clergyman for upholding the system of slavery and all its cruelties, but he also started to develop other strands of his American exceptionalist argument. He used the American church as an example of a whole system that not only was double minded about religious freedom but actually used religion and scripture to withhold enlightenment and learning from blacks. He gave examples of ministers of the gospel who quoted scripture to bolster the Southern position that blacks were either not capable, or not made to learn. Douglass stated, "They also tell the wretched slaves that God made them to do the working, and the white men to do the thinking."[52] Douglass used this story in a humorous way and was able to point out that American religion stifled intellectual growth for blacks, which was contrary to Americans' belief in individualism and equality of opportunity. The path to self made men and equality for all was impeded by the very institution that should have aided blacks the most.

In a speech Douglass gave three days later he continued to drive home these points but also placed America within a larger global and historical context. He painted a picture of America as a nation that started with the highest and noblest principles of freedom and said that no other nation on the globe showed more clearly how slavery could dissolve these principles of equality and individualism. He exclaimed,

> Yes, she started and proclaimed to the world that all mankind were created freeborn; and for the maintenance of that principle she solemnly swore before high Heaven that she would vindicate and uphold it by force, at expense, at the sacrifice of life, and everything that was dear to honour and integrity. But alas! How had she carried out her pledge: what was the condition of slavery there? Did they not see it disregarding the rights of property, outraging the laws of God and nature, and setting decency and morality at nought? But in no case did they see its corrupting influences more dreadfully portrayed than in the

[52] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1841-1846). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, Volume 1., 43.

religious organization of the country.[53]

Frederick Douglass extolled the ideals Americans professed but quickly highlighted the chasm between the public profession of freedom and the reality of American slavery. He ranked America's religious institutions as the organization that suffered the most because of slavery and the contradictory nature of American rhetoric and reality.

Within the same speech he noted that as he got further away from America the more influence he felt he had on persuading public opinion not only in Europe but in America.[54] Douglass consciously tried to use public opinion in Europe to shame Americans into dealing with the problem of slavery. He purposely placed America within the larger context of the globe and history but more often contrasted America with Europe. He would state that he was trying to appeal to all humankind, which was true, but Europe in his eyes represented to America what was part of a flawed past.

One of the core beliefs of American exceptionalism relates to the unique circumstances in which the United States was founded. It was a country that had no history of despotism and had formed for the purpose of pursuing liberty for all. It had broken away from Great Britain for that exact reason. In its young history, America was not held down by the old institutions such as monarchies or a feudal system, which allowed rank and position to define one's life in America. Douglass seized on this type of exceptionalist thinking about Europe. He continually held up Great Britain as an example that America should aspire to be. He used Europe as a way to show how

[53] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 46.
[54] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 59.

exceptionally hypocritical America could be when it came to slavery.

This rhetorical strategy became common for Douglass during his time in Ireland as political events unfolded in the United States in 1845. The major political event of 1845 was the possible annexation of Texas into the United States. There was talk of Texas trying to reach a settlement with Mexico that would give Texas official recognition by Mexico and avoid war. Great Britain was seen as a possible mediator between the two parties and there were also theories that Great Britain wanted to eventually emancipate all slaves in Texas, thus creating a place like Canada where slaves could go to find refuge from American slavery. President Tyler would eventually take the necessary steps to annex Texas but it had plenty of opposition from all sides including some Southerners.[55]

Douglass delivered one of his first speeches concerning the annexation of Texas on the 3rd of November 1845, which was shortly before Texas became part of the United States. He immediately made it clear that he felt that the Congress and the President wanted Texas for the sole purpose of securing another market for surplus slaves to go to. He explained that both the middle states like Virginia and the more southern states were experiencing a sharp decline in the price of slaves and saw Texas as a place that would drive up demand and recapture higher prices.[56]

This was not a thought that was unique to Douglass but he seized on this opportunity to introduce England as a sharp contrast to an America that was trying to expand slavery while England had already officially eradicated slavery among all of its empire. Douglass singled out the West Indies, which most abolitionists did, as a prime

[55] William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1990). 402-425.
[56] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1841-1846). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, Volume 1., 73-74.

example of how slavery could be abolished by a country if it had the will. He lamented the fact that a Monarchical government could find the means to end slavery among its people but the United States democratic republic could not. Not only did it not have the will to abolish slavery but was trying to expand it into new territories. Douglass used despotic England to showcase how hypocritical America was when it came to pretenses of liberty and equality for all. He finished the speech by clearly laying out his intentions of shaming Americans into doing the right thing. He stated,

> I want the Americans to know that in the good city of Cork I ridiculed their nation---I attempted to excite the utter contempt of the people here upon them. O that America were freed from slavery! Her brightness would then dazzle the eastern world. The oppressed of all nations might flock to her as an asylum from monarchical or other despotic rulers.[57]

Abolitionists in general used the West Indies as their special case to show the world how blacks could free themselves from bondage and prosper. They held emancipation day on the 1st of August each year to celebrate the day that slavery was abolished in the West Indies. It was in many ways meant to mirror America's Fourth of July celebrations. So Douglass used the West Indies like many abolitionist but left the door open for America to redeem itself by changing its position on slavery. He even concluded the speech with almost an accidental side note that America had the elements for becoming a great nation but then quickly changed directions and concluded that he was an outlaw there. It was one of the first signs of how Douglass's rhetoric would change from a harsh tone of American exceptionalism to a more optimistic one, but it was a baby step in that direction with a quick retreat.

Douglass even used Canada to represent American hypocrisy and to provide a polar opposite to Texas geographically and on the issue of slavery. Douglass referred to

[57] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 76.

America's democratic republic as "America's bastard republicanism." America boasted the loudest about being the freest place in the world but failed to mention slavery. He described how the United States had reached into Mexico to expand slavery while many blacks were fleeing to monarchical Canada in the opposite direction.[58] Time and time again Douglass would portray Great Britain as the beacon of freedom where the oppressed went to find freedom. Texas was admitted to the United States in late December of 1845 and Douglass would continue to denounce the acquisition.

In March of 1846 he was now in Paisley, Scotland where he delivered a speech on why the Free Church of Scotland should not accept money from Southern churches that supported slavery. This was a major controversy in Scotland at the time. The Free Church had broken away from the Established Scottish Church in 1843 and had secured 3000 pounds from American slave owners who were members and leaders of Southern churches in America. Douglass chastised the Free Church of Scotland for accepting the money and eventually the phrase "Send Back the Money" was shouted at every speaking event he attended.[59] Douglass highlighted how American slavery could seep into every crevice of the world but a more important part of the speech was when he spoke about the United States Constitution directly, one of the first times he had done so.

Douglass believed that the United States Constitution was a fraudulent document that propped up a fraudulent American government. At this point, Douglass was still heavily influenced by Garrison's point of view on the Constitution. Garrison thought that the Constitution should be done away with, and that the entire United States government

[58] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 80-81.

[59] Nikki Brown, 'Send back the money!'Frederick Douglass's Anti-Slavery Speeches in Scotland and the Emergence of African American Internationalism. STAR (Scotland's Transatlantic Relations) Project Archive. www.star.ac.uk (April 2004).

would have to be discarded in favor of a new government accountable to God. To Garrison, the Constitution was a contract made and signed by slaveholders and symbolized a nation founded on the evil of slavery. Douglass echoed this philosophy throughout his early years in the abolitionist movement.

The speech in Paisley, Scotland March of 1846 demonstrates Garrison's influence on Douglass's position on the Constitution. Douglass referred to President Polk as a man-thief and talked about how the constitution stated all men were created equal but in practice this was not the case. He then quickly shifted from the constitution to religion again. He contrasted how Americans wanted to send missionaries to people on the other side of the globe but hated blacks at their own door. He went on to contrast the Bible and the slave trade, the church and the prison, slaveholders whipping their slaves then leaving to preach at their local church, and sermons on the evils of stealing while slaves were being sold in the marketplace.[60] Douglass did quickly mention the Constitution in this speech and denounced it, but pivoted back to religion for the rest of the speech. This was an early indicator that Douglass would eventually delve more into the political side of the argument against slavery but at that time he still mainly focused on American religious hypocrisy and lack of equality for blacks. He also continued to place that argument within the larger context of the world by mentioning America's attempts to send missionaries to all parts of the globe while discriminating against blacks. Douglass argued that America was an exceptionally awful place where all institutions would declare equality and freedom but would deny those rights to blacks, whether it was the government, churches, or the educational system.

[60] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 187-188.

Just a month later Douglass followed up with another speech on the 6th of April in Paisley, Scotland. It was entitled *America's Compromise With Slavery and the Abolitionists' Work.* The change of Frederick Douglass's message was becoming more apparent. The harshness of his tone towards America was changing slightly. He still used an American exceptionalist rhetoric that characterized America as exceptionally hypocritical. The slight change was Douglass's view on America. He stated, "They started from a high, and noble position---their constitution based on human equality. With equal rights emblazoned on their fronts, they were determined to establish freedom; but they committed a fatal mistake, they allowed a compromise with slavery."[61] Douglass was still critical throughout the speech but he used the word mistake to describe America's relationship with slavery. He contends that this mistake has allowed slavery to weaken Americans' love of freedom and desensitizes them to the evils of slavery. He also argued that slavery desensitized Americans to pleas from the groups that were being wronged by slavery while those same pleas were "music to the ears of slaveholders."[62]

Within the same speech Douglass brought up the Creole Affair, which was a slave revolt in 1841 aboard the *Creole.* The slaves were successful in their revolt and eventually landed on the Bahamas, which was controlled by the British. The British allowed the slaves to remain free and justified the revolt as necessary because the slaves were illegally obtained.[63] Great Britain had already abolished slavery in 1834. Douglass brought up the Creole Affair to describe the reaction of American government and used the names of Henry Clay and John Calhoun who denounced the insurrection and the

[61] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 210.
[62] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 210.
[63] Edward D. Jervey and C. Harold Huber, "The Creole Affair" *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 65, No. 3 (Summer, 1980), pp. 196-211

position taken by Great Britain.[64] Douglass divulged the nature of American double-mindedness with a story of slaves running to "monarchical freedom" in Great Britain as they ran away from the American republic, while U.S. Congressmen complained about individuals gaining their freedom.[65] He continued to use the exceptionalist rhetoric that contrasted the United States with Great Britain. He created a clear juxtaposition between the monarchy of England who abolished slavery with the democratic republic of America, which continued to defend slavery voraciously. He then finalized the speech by saying that America is a brilliant example to the world and could be a "noble example" if it just abolished slavery.[66] Again he backed off from this statement by saying that he would not talk well of America until his race was free from slavery. The tone of his American exceptionalist rhetoric was changing in subtle ways. He was still pointing out America's flaws but also noted some of its exceptional qualities that were positive. He would back off these statements, although there was a definitive and subtle shift in his argument.

In May of 1846 the United States was just getting involved in the Mexican-American war. At the same time Douglass made his way to England and gave speeches on slavery that still focused mainly on American hypocrisy in religion and equal rights, but along with a slightly more positive tone, Douglass also began to focus more on the political aspects of slavery. By August of 1846 he expounded more fully on the U.S. Constitution and put forth the familiar argument that many Garrisonians would use against slavery. He noted that the fugitive slave clause of the Constitution required all

[64] John W. Blassingame, Series 1, Volume 1. 211.
[65] John W. Blassingame, 212.
[66] John W. Blassingame, 212.

Americans to return slaves to their owners. He used this fact to critique the laws and government of the United States. He also read a list of Southern slave laws that laid out how many lashes should be given to slaves for simple infractions such as the stipulation that eight or more slaves grouped together without a white person present would be punished by receiving 20 lashes.[67] Later, in the same speech, he went back to his more traditional approach by stating that moral and religious power were the best tools to combat slavery and that it was a problem for all mankind, but he did not dismiss political action as a tool and did consider it a part of the overall strategy. He wrapped this evolving argument within the familiar context of holding America up in direct contrast with Great Britain and felt that Americans were a "sensitive people, and particularly so to the opinions of Britain."[68] This was all part of his American exceptionalist approach that specifically pointed out how old Europe was more advanced than America when it came to slavery. He never abandoned the attack on American hypocrisy but his tone and strategy was changing slowly, even as early as 1846.

A speech delivered at the end of August, 1846 in Bristol, England encompasses Frederick Douglass's overall argument that he had been developing for the past five years. He called America the "Nation of Professors" who professed the freest nation on earth where the oppressed came to find refuge. Americans professed civil and religious freedom while denying three million people the right to marry, educate themselves, or read the very Bible needed to practice American Christianity.[69] He used America's own

[67] John W. Blassingame, 316-320.
[68] John W. Blassingame, 325.
[69] John W. Blassingame, 345-347.

rhetoric against itself in a global context and constantly critiqued American religion for its blatant hypocrisy but did it in a less harsh manner that did acknowledge America was unique in many ways. It just needed to live up to those ideals for blacks.

Frederick Douglass was still very much under the influence of Garrison and this is seen throughout his speeches from 1841 all the way through his conflict with Garrison that eventually led to a severing of their ties in 1851. Douglass did though start to develop his own style and strategy of how he thought he could effectively impact the slavery argument much earlier than 1851, and even before Douglass changed his position on the Constitution as a pro-slavery document. He used an American exceptionalist argument that scolded America for its exceptional hypocrisy when it came to religion and equality for all in education and American laws. He did this while trying to place pressure on America by purposely contrasting America with a Europe that was supposed to be the place where despots ruled and liberty suffered, but instead was able to paint America in that very light on the subject of slavery. He did all of this while slowly changing the harshness of his tone towards America and leaving the thought that America could be as exceptional as it professed.

CHAPTER III

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: A SHIFT IN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALIST RHETORIC

1847 was the last year of Frederick Douglass's tour of Europe. It was a year in America where the Mexican-American War continued while politically the U.S. Congress debated the Wilmot Proviso, which proposed that any territory gained from the Mexican-American war would not be allowed to have slavery. David Wilmot was a democratic congressman from Pennsylvania who was not against slavery for moral reasons but did not want to see the South gain more political strength by expanding slavery into the new territories. He had initially introduced the Wilmot Proviso in 1846, which failed in the Senate, but re-introduced the bill in 1847. Frederick Douglass always followed American politics closely and saw the Wilmot Proviso as a shift in the battle against slavery. Northerners were starting to take more action to prevent Southern slavery from gaining more power. This would have a profound impact on Douglass's views of how best to approach the argument against slavery.[70]

He would give approximately 650 speeches between 1847 and 1854. During his last months in Europe he continued some familiar themes in his speeches but further developed his own thoughts and strategies as he transitioned to life back in America. Many factors influenced Douglass's glacier-like transition from an American

[70] James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics.* W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. (2007). 16-17.

exceptionalist argument that was abrasive to one that noted America's shortcomings, but started to praise America's noble beginning. His argument also called out America for being exceptionally hypocritical but started to argue that eventually America would live up to its unique promise and mission in the world.

Some of the factors that influenced Douglass's evolution in thinking and strategy were external and some were internal. One of the external factors was the political scene Douglass was coming back to in the late 1840s and into the early 1850s. The antislavery movement was diversifying at a rapid rate. There was still the Garrisonian non-government and nonviolent resistance approach but there were more abolitionists who were willing to advocate violence in the name of freeing slaves and more abolitionists who were willing to use political means to topple slavery. The historian Stanley Harold's *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism* documented how abolitionists from the 1840s up until the Civil War became more aggressive in their approach and not only tried to convince the North that slavery should be abolished but directly addressed the slaves of the South to either escape from slavery or use violent means to gain their freedom. Harold focuses on Gerrit Smith and Henry Highland Garnet's more militant approach to fighting slavery. They were in stark contrast to the Garrisonian brand of abolitionism.[71] Douglass had correspondence with both and became a personal friend to Gerrit Smith who helped fund Douglass's newspapers. Gerrit Smith was heavily involved in the political realm of abolition and believed the Constitution was actually an antislavery document.[72] This would have a major impact on Douglass and the shift in his American

[71] Stanley Harold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism.* University of Kentucky Press. (2004).
[72] Eric. J. Sundquist, Ed. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary & Historical Essays.* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). 205-223.

exceptionalist rhetoric. It would eventually lead him to embrace the Constitution as an antislavery document, which also allowed him to lose some of the harshness towards America.[73] It also allowed him to express admiration for America's founding principles while still imploring Americans to live up to these principles and realize its true mission to civilize the world.

The internal factor that influenced Douglass's antislavery approach the most was his providential view of history, which led him to believe that there were no accidents and that there was a divine purpose for America to become a "Nation of Nations." He believed in human perfection and progress and believed America could be the place where this could be realized. This caused him to believe that slavery served a greater purpose and that it would be abolished in the long run.[74] Garrison was well known for this type of thinking but Douglass did not come to those conclusions just because Garrison influenced him. His life in slavery and his escape from it allowed him to come to the conclusion that God had not intended Douglass to be a slave for his whole life. He took this same view of American slavery based on his personal experience.

Even though he had a providential view of history that assumed that God's hand was in everything he also had a humanist philosophy that made him believe that humans created the change they wanted to see. This seems paradoxical but it was a way that Douglass could come to terms with American slavery. Humans had caused this great sin and it was up to humans to bring resolution. God allowed humans to do the necessary

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[73] Benjamin Soskis, *Heroic Exile: The Transatlantic Development of Frederick Douglass 1845-1847.* http://www.yale.edu/glc/soskis/fr-6.htm. (accessed 1 March 2014).

[74] Nathan I. Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 1980. 74-75.

things to bring about the change that was already ordained by God.[75] These external and internal influences caused Douglass to shift from a rhetoric that could only see America as hypocritical in his early years of abolitionism to a more nuanced approach that found greatness in the founding ideals of America but scolded Americans for not living up to them. He used this idea of America as a unique experiment that could realize its exceptionalism if it could only abolish slavery.

Frederick Douglass remained in England until late April of 1847 when he made his way back to the United States.[76] While still in England in February of 1847 Douglass gave a speech entitled: *The Skin Aristocracy in America*. He continued familiar themes of American hypocrisy. Associating aristocracy with America was another way of Douglass contrasting America with Europe. He contended that Americans practiced an aristocratic tradition that did not allow 500,000 free colored people to enjoy the same freedoms as whites. He referred to blacks fighting alongside whites during the American Revolution but stated that "the musket was taken from their shoulders, the whip applied to their backs, and they were driven back to the fields of slavery."[77] This contradicted the picture drawn by Alexis De Tocqueville, a French aristocrat who had come to America in the 1830s and wrote *Democracy in America*, which noted that Americans did not have as much respect for titles, did respect hard work, and tended to promote individualism, though he saw slavery as an issue.[78] A meritocracy was what Americans proclaimed

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[75] Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass.* The University of Carolina Press: 1984: 48-50.
[76] Benjamin Soskis, *Heroic Exile: The Transatlantic Development of Frederick Douglass 1845-1847.* http://www.yale.edu/glc/soskis/fr-6.htm. (accessed 1 March 2014).
[77] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1847-1854). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, (Volume 2) 4.
[78] Gerald E. Bevan (Translator). *Alexis De Tocqueville: Democarcy in America and Two Essays on America.* Penguin Books: London (2003).

while Douglass argued that it was more like a skin aristocracy. If blacks did possess any intellectual capability they were despised by white Americans. Douglass also stated his goal was to provoke Americans to think about this paradox. He noted that Americans were always interested in what others thought of them personally but also what foreigners thought about their country.[79] The picture of blacks fighting in the American Revolution for freedom alongside whites was an attempt to expose the fatal flaw in American thinking. It was also a sign of Douglass's shift towards invoking the origins of America to persuade Americans to live up to the ideals put forth by the founding fathers.

Frederick Douglass gave his farewell speech to the British on the last day of March, 1847. He used the opportunity to specifically attack the U.S. Constitution. He highlighted two key articles of the constitution that expressly supported slavery. He first mentioned Article I, Section 8 that allowed for Congress to call forth a militia to suppress insurrections. He then went on to mention Article IV, Section 2, which allowed Americans to recover fugitive slaves and bring them back to their owners.[80] So though Douglass was starting to refer more to American origins, he was still not willing to see much good in those origins. His critique of the Constitution was right in step with Garrisonians who thought it was a pro slavery document. Douglass's exceptionalist rhetoric was changing slowly but had not evolved yet to a point where he could acknowledge some of the positive aspects of America's beginnings.

Douglass was received with open arms by most of the people in England who came out to hear his speeches. Garrison noted the equal treatment Douglass received

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[79] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1847-1854). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, (Volume 2) 5-6.
[80] John W. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Speeches, Debates, and Interviews (1847-1854). Yale University Press, 1979. Print. Series 1, (Volume 2) 22-23.

from whites in England and recalled the different newspapers that gave Douglass glowing reviews. Douglass himself felt that for the first time in his life he was treated like a free man.[81]

In late April of 1847 Douglass boarded the *Cambria* to go back to America and was forcefully segregated from the white first class passengers of the ship. He wrote angry letters to different English news outlets and was eventually given a public apology by the owner of the ship.[82] His reception in America by the New York press was not warm either. The *New York Sun* stated that Douglass had piled on abuse after abuse on America and thought this was especially disturbing coming from a black man. At the thirteenth anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society on 11 May, 1847, Douglass made his first speech in America since he had left in 1845. He made it very clear that he "had no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism."[83] It was a rhetoric that he had used extensively while in England but it would be the last time Douglass would make this type of harsh statement without qualifying his position with a careful rationale of why he would say it. Douglass was pragmatic enough to know that he would not be well received by Americans if he continued to employ the harsh language of an exceptionally hypocritical America without also balancing it with a measure of respect for the founding principles of America and the belief that America was capable of change. The historian James Oakes described how Douglass became more pragmatic in his approach as he returned to the United States. Oakes asked, "How many Americans, even northerners with antislavery sympathies, could be moved to anything but revulsion

[81] John W. Blassingame, 58.
[82] Eric Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass.* New York: International Publishers, 1950. (Vol. 1) 233.
[83] John W. Blassingame, 59-60.

by such strident denunciations of their churches, their beloved Constitution, and their democratic politics?"[84] Oakes also thought that Douglass probably realized this before he came back to the United States. Douglass's speeches toward the end of his stay in England indicate that this shift in his antislavery rhetoric was already taking place. It was a shift in small degrees that continued during his time back in the United States.

Douglass gave a speech in late September of 1847 that addressed one of his typical targets, the American church. Douglass gave examples of Southern slaveholders who used the bible to defend their ownership of slaves. Douglass had used these examples in many speeches and often mimicked the slaveholders. This time, however, the speech went in a different direction. Douglass pleaded with his audience to not misunderstand his critique of American religion. He made it clear that he was not someone who despised religion in any fashion. The abolitionists were often accused of having no religion and called infidels. Douglass let the audience know that he loved Christianity while clarifying the type of Christianity to which he was referring. He quoted scripture of a religion that "came from above---which is pure, peacable, gentle….. and without hypocrisy."[85] This is a well known scripture that religious Americans in the audience would have been familiar with. He then contrasted the religion he loved with the religion he deplored. He referenced the religion of the Priest and the Levite who in the story of the Good Samaritan allowed the wounded man to lie on the street while they continued on their way to their house of worship.[86] Douglass employed a different approach to a topic he had covered many times before. Instead of railing against the evils

[84] James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York (2007) 14.
[85] John W. Blassingame, 99.
[86] John W. Blassingame, 100.

of American churches he chose to define what he thought religion was supposed to be. This was something that his American audience could relate to and showed that Douglass knew a good deal of the bible and was not just some abolitionist that wanted to rid America of all its institutions. In this same speech he also used the story of the Good Samaritan as an analogy of what Americans were doing when they allowed slavery to flourish in the United States. This included slaveholders, Southerners in general, and Northerners who were all guilty of playing the role of the Priest and the Levite. It was a way to demonstrate America's exceptional hypocrisy without completely offending the American audience he was trying to win over. One observer of the speech noted that the audience winced at many of the things Douglass had to say about American religion but he also noted that the audience felt that what Douglass said was true.[87] Douglass used scripture in a way that implored Americans to live up to a higher religion and realize an America where true religion was practiced and not just a religion that was for show.

The story of the Good Samaritan also appealed to Americans' need for equality in the realm of religion. The Priest and the Levite, which Douglass referred to as Pharisees, was a symbol of church hierarchy. The Pharisees always prayed the loudest and did things to make sure their good deeds were seen by everyone but never seemed to get the point of true religion in Jesus's eyes. This symbolism would have been well understood by his audience. Slaveholders and Northerners who discriminated against blacks, were for all intents and purposes, the Pharisees of their day. As Douglass had said in many previous speeches, they professed the loudest about their religion and equality for all but lived a life among blacks who were not allowed to even strive for equality.

[87] John W. Blassingame, 94.

As Douglass's tone and strategy changed, so did his relationship with Garrison. Douglass wanted to start his own newspaper as soon as he got back to America but this was discouraged by Garrison. Garrison thought that there were not enough readers to add another abolitionist newspaper. There was some truth to this because many of the papers were not profitable and when Douglass did start his own paper he did need money from Gerrit Smith to keep the newspaper functioning at times.[88] Garrison also thought that Douglass still needed advice and counsel from those who had more experience. Douglass initially took Garrison's advice, but by the end of 1847 Douglass had reached the conclusion that he had to start his own abolitionist paper. The *North Star* was first published on the 3rd of December, 1847 in Rochester, New York. His move to New York is seen by some historians as a symbolic gesture, which allowed Douglass to further distance himself both physically and mentally away from Garrison and to continue to develop his own ideas.[89]

As Douglass was shifting to more independence from Garrison his antislavery argument continued to evolve into one that recognized American uniqueness, especially when he talked about the nation's founding. He was able to point out the noble cause the founding fathers fought for while placing American slaves in the same category. Douglass would often remind his audience that blacks had fought side by side with whites during the American Revolution, but were not permitted to enjoy the same freedoms as whites.

He also saw America as a unique place where the global debate on slavery would be seen by the whole world and a final answer on the slavery debate would come for one

[88] William S. Mcfeely, *Frederic Douglass*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York (1991) 147.
[89] Mcfeely, 154.

side or the other. This did not mean that he completely abandoned all severity when describing America. In a speech given in May of 1848 Douglass asked the audience to suppose that they were black. He then explained how slaves were sold to pay for the expenses of missionaries. The sarcastic tone of the speech and the tough words for American churches in both the North and South were too much for half of the New York audience. They proceeded to walk out. He again stated that he had nothing against true religion but hated the hypocritical nature of the established churches in America who supported slavery or stood by and did nothing to end it.[90]

Abolitionists always celebrated their own emancipation day, which was the 1st of August every year and marked the day when the British abolished slavery in the West Indies. 1 August 1848 was no exception and Douglass took the opportunity to use his evolving exceptionalist rhetoric to put the day in historical context. He stated, "We live in times which have no parallel in the history of the world. The grand commotion is universal and all-pervading…The grand conflict of liberty with the monster slavery, has at last come."[91] He mentioned that the advances in technology had shrunk the globe so that slavery was an issue for humankind. This global context was part of his rhetorical strategy from his earlier speeches when he was in Europe. The difference in the emancipation day speech was the sense of a divine will that could not be altered. He referenced the book of Revelation, which he believed prophesied the shrinking of the world into an interconnected continent.[92] He mentioned these occurrences to emphasize that it was an inevitability that slavery would come to an end and he connected the

[90] John W. Blassingame, 128-129.
[91] John W. Blassinggame, 135.
[92] John W. Blassingame, 136.

demise of slavery with the ever progressing world that was moving closer and closer to a universal bond. He mentioned the French Revolution along with the other revolutions taking place in Europe in 1848 and depicted these events as evidence of an inevitable march towards equality among all, which meant freedom for slaves at some point. Douglass noted that the French people were not successful in their revolution and spoke about how slaveholders pointed to France as an example of what happens when individuals try to "make equal what God has made unequal."[93] Douglass countered that argument by giving the analogy of a baby just learning to walk. He saw these revolutions as an indicator of things to come.

Within the same speech he then pointed out the hypocrisy in American religion and America's profession of equality. He laid the blame on every American citizen who allowed slavery to continue.[94] These were familiar themes throughout his antislavery career, but he placed America within a context of a providential plan that would not allow slavery to continue much longer. This part of Douglass's exceptionalist argument was influenced by outside forces such as Garrisonians who were progressives that believed in the eventual perfection of mankind. He was also encouraged by the revolutions in Europe that were reshaping the hierarchy that had been in place so long. At home the Free Soil party formed in 1848, which was a major signal that slavery could eventually be in trouble. Free soilers wanted slavery to be contained within the South and did not want to see slavery expand into the new territories that were captured during the Mexican-American War. They supported the Wilmot Proviso that would have essentially met

[93] John W. Blassingame, 137-142.
[94] John W. Blassingame, 143.

those goals.[95] These were clear signs to Douglass that slavery was in retreat and that God had ordained it to happen.

The other half of Douglass's thinking was that even though God had ordained it, it was up to humans to carry out the plan. He saw himself as an agent of this change and was trying to convince other Americans to join him, including slaves. In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was enacted. It allowed slaveholders to track down slaves in the North and bring them back to slavery. It also had penalties for Northerners who tried to help blacks and gave no protection to free blacks under the law.[96] Douglass used this law to advocate action among free blacks, slaves and Northerners, including violence if necessary to prevent slaveholders from taking blacks back into slavery. In a speech titled, *Do Not Send Back the Fugitive* Douglass advocated violence if necessary and he noted that "he had never seen a meeting more unanimous and strong."[97] He coupled this call for human agency with his providential belief that slavery would come to an end. In a speech a couple of days after, he talked about men's eternal right to liberty that could not be stopped by any human institution, only hindered, and he believed "that their career must be short, for Eternal Providence will speedily vindicate the right."[98] He believed that equality in the world was just a matter of time, but he portrayed America as a possible example to the rest of the world if Americans could abolish slavery.

In the same speech he warned the North that the power of slavery was tainting the founding principles of the Declaration of Independence. He cautioned that the "genius of

[95] William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion, vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854 (New York, 1990). 477-479.
[96] James Oakes, 50-52.
[97] John W. Blassingame, 243.
[98] John W. Blassingame, 261.

American institutions" were in conflict with slavery. This was much different from Frederick Douglass's speeches during his early years in Europe. He wouldn't have said that slavery was in conflict with American founding principles and their institutions. He would have blamed the institutions themselves. He did not abdicate the responsibilities that Americans had to repair these wrongs but he made it a point to persuade Americans to live up to their founding principles instead of degrading the founders themselves. He called slavery a "blot on the American name" and the "only national reproach which need make an American hang their head in shame, in the presence of Monarchical governments."[99] In a way, Douglass was complementing Americans for all the good qualities while expressing how slavery was ruining an otherwise stellar reputation around the world. He mourned the fact that America could not carry out its mission to help others experience freedom because other countries would point to the sin of slavery and ask why America is trying to help others gain freedom while the Fugitive Slave Act was the law of the land at home. The unique mission God had ordained for America could not go forward unless slavery ended.

He then invoked patriotism to finalize the speech. Douglass had initially said that he could never have patriotism when he first returned to America. Now he was advocating patriotism, but not its traditional definition. He explained that he would invoke patriotism to inspire sincere repentance instead of trying to hide the sin of slavery. He would use patriotism to induce Americans to "unite all our energies in the grand effort to remedy that wrong."[100]

He then stated it was in the spirit of patriotism that he warned Americans that God

[99] John W. Blassingame, 269.
[100] John W. Blassingame, 270.

would not allow slavery to continue no matter how great a country America was. He referred to the Passover angel from the Bible who came and killed the first born of all the Egyptians because Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go from slavery.[101] This was a definite shift in Douglass's American exceptionalist argument. The focus had shifted away from just a view of America as exceptionally hypocritical. He still noted American hypocrisy and inconsistencies but now he was imploring them to repent from their sin before God judged them. Repentance was the key to fulfill the plan that God had for America. Douglass always assumed that individuals had to take the action for God's plan to be fulfilled and could not just sit idly by waiting for God's mission to be fulfilled.

Historians refer to speeches like Douglass's as Jeremiads, which had three main components to it. The jeremiad consisted of a belief in the promise of human perfection, lamentation of the present decline of the nation, and a prophecy that America would fulfill its mission. Puritans who came to America believed that America was destined to be a beacon to the rest of the world, a new Israel that had escaped from the corrupting traditions of Europe to fulfill God's mission of the millennium in the new world. Historians also note that many abolitionists used the jeremiad to argue against slavery. Douglass did not use this type of rhetoric until this point in his antislavery campaign.[102] Much more of his speeches thereafter used the jeremiad to try to convince Americans that slavery was an evil that Americans needed to repent of to truly fulfill their destiny.

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[101] John W. Blassingame, 270-271.

[102] David Howard-Pitney, *The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric: from Frederick Douglass to W.E. B. Du Bois, 1841-1919.* American Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1986), 481-492. Published by: The John Hopkins University Press.
See also: David Howard-Pitney, *Wars, White America, and the Afro-American Jeremiad: Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr.* The Journal of Negro History. Vol. 71. No.1/4 (Winter-Autumn, 1986) 23-37. Published by: Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, Inc.

Within all of these speeches Douglass consistently displayed optimism. The jeremiad itself relies on an unshakable optimism but there were times when Douglass did express despair. In January of 1851 Douglass gave a couple of speeches that focused on recent events where blacks had been taken from New York back to the South via the Fugitive Slave Act. One of those individuals was Henry Long who had escaped from slavery in 1848 but was taken back to Virginia once he was found.[103] Douglass lamented the Fugitive Slave Act and the increased enforcement he perceived. He also spent a considerable amount of time decrying the effort to colonize blacks out of America.[104] Colonization was especially odious to Douglass. Though he had these moments he would always follow them up with a belief that at the darkest times America was coming closer to ridding itself of slavery.

Douglass continued to shift his rhetoric to one that placed America in a position of uniqueness to impact the rest of the world. In a speech in May of 1851 he characterized American slavery as a "grand obstruction" to progress not just in the United States but throughout the world. If America could only deal with slavery it would become that beacon of liberty it always professed to be.[105] He continued to couple this strategy with a praise for America's founding principles. Indeed, by 1851 he had completely changed course on the Constitution and no longer considered it to be a proslavery document. This came after extensive correspondence with Gerrit Smith who thought that it would be helpful if Douglass would argue for the Constitution as a antislavery document. Douglass even participated in a couple of debates where he argued

[103] John W. Blassingame, 279-291.
[104] John W. Blassingame, 291-310.
[105] John W. Blassingame, 333.

for the proslavery side. He would use all the clauses that seemed on the surface to support slavery as evidence that the Founders wanted to protect slavery. Through this process he convinced himself that the Constitution was not a proslavery document. He now believed that the Constitution could only be read with no attempt to interpret the intent of the Founders. The words on the document, according to Douglass, did not support slavery. This was the last link between Douglass and Garrison that was severed. Garrison never forgave Douglass after that and actually attacked him for it. James Oakes argues that this allowed Douglass to not only fight slavery through moral persuasion but through political means.[106]

The speech that culminated Frederick Douglass's transformation in American exceptionalist rhetoric was his most well known speech: *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* He delivered the speech in Rochester, New York on the 5th of July in Corinthian Hall. The 4th of July in 1852 fell on a Sunday, which meant that the Rochester citizens did not celebrate it until the 5th. Traditionally many abolitionists waited until the 5th of July as a form of protest. So this would not have been unusual for Douglass.[107] Douglass had practiced the speech for two to three weeks leading up to the occasion.[108]

He started the speech by referring to the 4th of July as America's national Independence day, not Douglass's. He also compared the 4th of July to the Jews celebration of the Passover. He invoked the image of God's people from the very beginning of the speech. He then went on to proclaim that America was still a very young nation, which gave Douglass hope that there was still time for America to make

[106] James Oakes, 19-20.
[107] James A. Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July Oration.* Palgrave Macmillan: New York (2006) 8.
[108] James A. Colaiaco, 23.

changes. Within the first few minutes of the speech he explained how America had been born under unique circumstances and how the founding fathers were great men who had done great deeds and should be remembered with admiration.[109] This was the exceptionalist rhetoric Douglass had been developing for years leading up to this speech. He used the uniqueness of America's beginnings and the founding fathers as a way to endear himself to the audience.

He then used the founding fathers fight for freedom to parallel the plight of blacks in America. If the founding fathers were venerated for shedding blood in the name of freedom why were slaves allowed to stay in bondage? He also employed the analogy of Abraham who was the father of the Jews. Israelites respected Abraham but then rejected all the prophets and Jesus that followed. Douglass contended that Washington gave up his slaves when he died but Americans did not follow his example. Douglass held up the founders to show Americans their hypocrisy.[110]

Douglass's shift away from overly harsh criticism and an appreciation for the founders did not mean that he did not criticize America. He criticized Americans throughout the speech for their hypocrisy and critiqued American religion, the internal slave trade, and American politics. All of the usual things that Douglass had railed against for years were on display in this lengthy speech. He was able to do this without alienating his audience because he had already made it clear that there were positive aspects to American society. He then ended the speech on an optimistic tone, which summed up his American excpetionalist argument:

I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement

[109] John W. Blassingame, 360-364.
[110] John W. Blassingame, 366-367.

> *from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age.*[111]

Douglass had shifted his rhetoric to acknowledge American exceptionalism while he still required Americans to live up to these exceptionalist ideals such as individualism, equality of opportunity, and a break from the traditions of a despotic Europe. He did all of this while he placed American slavery in a global context for the entire world to judge if America was living up to these ideals. Through all of this Douglass continued to remain optimistic because he did truly believe that America had a unique destiny to fulfill and he needed to do his part to make that happen.

[111] John W. Blassingame, 387.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE FITZHUGH'S ANTI-EXCEPTIONALIST RHETORIC

George Fitzhugh represented the extreme defense of slavery during the antebellum period. He is famous or infamous for suggesting that even whites should be enslaved if they could not take care of themselves. Even southerners were cautious when it came to this line of argument. Fitzhugh rejected the idea that America was unique in any sense and thought that America should look to history to inform its present. Instead of promoting American exceptionalism, he outright rejected it. Fitzhugh used an anti-exceptionalist argument to refute any notion of American exceptionalism while promoting his vision of what America should be. His vision included an American society based on familial slavery that purported to take care of all the slave's needs by providing shelter, food, clothing, and the watchful eye of the master. Fitzhugh wanted to do away with individualism, egalitarianism, and invited more government instead of less. He thought that equality among men was a theory that could not hold up under the scrutiny of any nation throughout history. He felt that history clearly proved that inequality was natural and slavery was the best system to negate the ill effects of social hierarchies. These ideas were contrary to the idea of American exceptionalism and promoted a vision of America that would embrace much more conservative principles.

George Fitzhugh was born November 4, 1806 in Prince William County.

Fitzhugh's father owned a moderate sized plantation but the plantation was sold after his father's death. The northern neck of Virginia, which was prosperous during colonial times, experienced a severe economic decline in the 1820s, which was reflected by the fortunes of George Fitzhugh and his immediate family who lived a meager existence.[112] Fitzhugh's education consisted of a modest formal education at a local school, which was described as a log cabin. He was required to memorize Latin, which he was particularly proud of throughout his life. Beyond this semi-formal education during his early years, he was self-educated.[113]

His greatest reading interests were British Reviews written mainly by Tories and the knowledge he gained from these reviews would have great influence on his later writing career. Fitzhugh's biographer stated, "He was ever to be far more detailed and specific in dealing with European trends than when discussing the affairs of South Carolina or Mississippi."[114] Those who reviewed his books did make it clear that Fitzhugh lacked the serious erudition normally attributed to philosophical works and Fitzhugh admitted this fact.[115] One renowned southern historian put it this way: "George Fitzhugh was a man who wrote too much and read too little."[116]

What Fitzhugh lacked in knowledge he was able to make up with wit, sarcasm, and an aptitude for making a compelling argument. Some of these characteristics may be attributed to his first profession as a small time lawyer. He had no great interest in the day-to-day legalities of

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[112] Harvey Wish, *George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1943; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), 6-7.
[113] Wish, p.8-9.
[114] Wish, 20.
[115] Wish, 20.
[116] Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) 128. Though Genovese was highly critical of Fitzhugh in this statement he started his analysis of Fitzhugh by admitting: "I do not deny some bias, for, as often happens to a historian who dallies with an attractive historical figure for some years, I have come to think of him as an old friend"(Genovese,119). This shows that even those who appreciated Fitzhugh's importance could not ignore his lack of erudition.

his job but he did enjoy the challenge of persuading a jury.[117] This would lead his lone biographer, the scholar who arguably knows Fitzhugh the best, to label Fitzhugh a propagandist. Fitzhugh would also hold a job as a law clerk in the Buchanan administration under Attorney General Jeremiah Sullivan Black, but he is best remembered for his writing career and particularly his defense of slavery.[118]

Fitzhugh's career as a proslavery defender and writer began in 1849 during a time when the southern proslavery defense had already increased in its militancy. Most historians, until recently, agreed that the 1820s but especially the early 1830s marked a point when the southern defense of slavery took a turn towards a more aggressive argument to defend their peculiar institution. The defense of slavery can be traced to colonial times but southerners of the colonial and early national period tended to use a "necessary evil" argument to defend the institution. This conceded that slavery might be wrong but that it was necessary for the economy of the South. The 1820s marked the beginnings of a subtle change to more of a "positive good" theory, which no longer admitted the evils of slavery but focused on the benevolence of the institution. The Missouri debates, the Denmark Vesey plot, and the activities of the American Colonization Society all drove southerners to take a more proactive approach to defending slavery.[119]

Historians argued that the early 1830s crystallized the "positive good" argument that started to develop in the 1820s. Historians pointed to the establishment of Garrisonian abolitionism in 1831 with the advent of the Boston *Liberator* as an irritant that forced the South to defend chattel bondage in a more rigorous manner. William Lloyd Garrison used his newspaper to attack slavery in an unprecedented fashion. Also, the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831)

[117] Wish, 11.
[118] Wish, 214, 313.
[119] William Sumner Jenkins, *Proslavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935) 75-78.

caused the Virginia state legislature to debate if they wanted to emancipate their slaves, which prompted Thomas R. Dew's *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831-1832*.[120] If there is one written work that almost all historians singled out for the full development of the "positive good" theory, Dew's review was the one.[121]

More recent works by historians have noted that the defense of slavery did not follow a linear path from a "necessary evil" argument to a "positive good" one. Charles Irons argued that Southern evangelicals actually did convince themselves that African Americans needed to be enslaved for the sake of saving African Americans' souls. So southern evangelicals did not use the religious proslavery argument out of convenience but believed they were doing the right thing..[122]

Lacy Ford, taking a page out of William Freehling's book, noted that the South was not a monolithic entity and that there was much disagreement over what type of proslavery defense should be put forth. Due to their different circumstances, the Upper South and Lower South often disagreed with how to deal with slavery and how to defend it.[123] Ford did think that the paternalistic argument eventually became the most prevalent proslavery argument closer to the middle of the 1830s.[124]

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[120] Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 2, 8,21.

[121] There are some historians who disagree with this line of thinking or think that it is too rigid to apply to the whole South. Larry Tise argues that the proslavery argument existed well before the 1820s and that originated in the North among the New England clergy, not the South. Reference: Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987). William Freehling did note that Dew's work did mark a transition, but points out that it took another 20 years for most of the South to embrace the "positive good" theory put forth by South Carolina perpetualists. Instead, Freehling believes that pockets of the upper south held on to Jefferson's conditional termination (a slow dwindling of slavery under the right conditions). Reference: William W. Freehling, *TheRoad to Disunion: Seccessionists at Bay 1776-1854* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 190-194.

[122] Charles F. Irons. *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

[123] Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

[124] Ford, 508-515.

The mid-1830s only heightened Southern fears about slavery becoming extinct. Northern abolitionists inundated the South with antislavery letters addressed to Southern citizens. To add fuel to the fire, abolitionists sent antislavery petitions to Congress asking for the emancipation of bondsmen in Washington D.C. They specified Washington D.C. because Congress did have jurisdiction in Washington D.C., unlike the states. These two strategic moves caused great consternation among Southern politicians and spawned the debates over the Gag Rules, which would go on until early 1844 when they were repealed. [125] During these debates, John C. Calhoun coined the term "positive good" in reference to the institution of slavery during his famous speech to the Senate in 1837 where he spoke against the antislavery petitions.[126]

The conflict over slavery only heightened in substance and rhetoric during the late 1840s and continued into the 1850s. In 1848, the Wilmot Proviso attempted to ban slavery by congressional power in all the states acquired from Mexico after the Mexican-American War. The accusation by Northern politicians of a "Slave Power" [referring to the South] started to become more pronounced. David Wilmot, the author of the Proviso resented what he perceived as a "Slave Power" that held control of the national government due to its 3/5's advantage.[127] The 3/5's advantage referred to the clause found in the U.S. Constitution, which gave Southerners disproportionate representation when voting for the president and the House of Representatives because slaves were counted as sixty percent of a person, thus adding much more representation for the South. After much heated debate, the Compromise of 1850 temporarily settled the issue by not banning slavery, but by making concessions to both the North and the South. The admission of California as a free state and the implementation of a

[125] Freehling, 287-352.
[126] Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003) 54-60.
[127] Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W .W Norton & Company, 1978) 50-51.

strict Fugitive Slave Law were two of the key pieces to appease both sides.[128] Although it temporarily settled the dispute, the contention over slavery was only growing.

This was the political and intellectual context in which George Fitzhugh began to publish his writings defending the institution of slavery. Also Fitzhugh was influenced by the political revolutions in Europe and the stirrings of socialism, which was championed by individuals such as Louis Blanc in France. He interpreted the problems of Europe and the suggestion of socialism as a solution as a clear sign that "free society" had failed and that free competition would cause the destruction of all decent society. Fitzhugh viewed socialism as an outgrowth or attempted solution to capitalism, and therefore flawed from its inception because it grew out of a theory of "free society." The North also provided many examples of how "free society" had produced dissident elements within Northern society, such as socialists, bloomers, shakers, and those who believed in "free love."[129]

Fitzhugh used his writings to respond to the rise of the Republican Party and their ideology of "free soil, free labor, free men." The Republican Party was officially established in 1854 with the debacle of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Republicans believed in free labor as the key to a successful democracy and touted its superiority to slavery. Along with this line of thinking the Republicans also believed in a conspiratorial "Slave Power" and thought that this elite group had control of the federal government.[130] Their belief in free labor was combined with a belief that social and physical mobility were crucial to maintaining free labor. If workers were allowed the opportunities to move upwards socially then there would be an incentive to work hard and sustain a free market economy. Unlike socialists or Fitzhugh, Republicans did

[128] Holt, 86-87.
[129] Wish 55-58.
[130] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 9.

not believe that wage workers had to stay in a wage earning position. Republicans thought that working Americans should take advantage of the opportunities that came through hard work to ascend up the economic ladder. Essential to this social and economic mobility was the idea that the western territory provided an escape from the urban centers of the east [wage-work]. The self-made American was synonymous with the frontier of the west.[131]

Coinciding with the belief in free labor and social mobility, Republicans preached equality of opportunity and individualism [at least for whites]. According to Republicans, if slavery were allowed to extend into the territories then American opportunities to realize social and economic mobility would vanish and be replaced by a completely contrary system where there was no hope for advancement and where equality and individualism were scorned. Using their free labor ideology, Republicans critiqued slavery as an archaic and inefficient labor system that degraded labor itself. They noted that the American economy needed an educated workforce that could manage a diversified economy. American workers also needed incentives to be the most productive. Slavery impeded both of these goals because it kept a large part of the Southern populous [blacks &poor whites] uneducated and held no incentive for working hard because there was no hope of advancement. Republicans also labeled Southerners as individuals who were adverse to hard work, lacked frugality, had no inventiveness, and were economically backwards. This was all due to the system of slavery.[132]

The Republican Party's belief in free labor, equality, and individualism were all components that could be used to argue for American exceptionalism. Republicans believed that there was enough geographic space in America to allow these ideals to become reality and could

[131] Foner, 13-27.
[132] Foner, 43, 45-46, 50.

defy the Malthusian theory that seemed to fit Europe so well. The only thing that could derail this vision for America was a slave labor system allowed to extend into the new territories, therefore keeping out free labor. William Seward's "Irrepressible Conflict" speech in 1858 embodied this type of thought and would be used as fuel for the proslavery defense.[133]

George Fitzhugh's two major works were *Sociology for the South* and *Cannibals All!* Both were filled with a philosophy that clearly responded to the political context of his time while especially addressing the free labor ideology of Republicans. He used an anti-exceptionalist argument to combat Republican ideology, which embodied many of the ideas of American exceptionalism. Fitzhugh started out writing proslavery pamphlets such as *Slavery Justified* and *What Shall Be Done With the Free Negroes?* in the late 1840s and early 1850s.[134] This would eventually lead to a job as a contributing editor of the *Richmond Examiner* (1854-1856) and for the *Richmond Enquirer* (1855-1857), two well-known proslavery southern newspapers. He also wrote a multitude of articles for *DeBow's Review* and the *Southern Literary Messenger* from1855 to 1867.[135] Fitzhugh would use these different platforms to develop his thought, which remained quite consistent leading up to the Civil War. His two books were the product of these articles written in the different newspapers and magazines. For this reason this analysis of Fitzhugh's proslavery argument will focus mainly on his second book *Cannibals All!* (1857). Considering that his thought did not change much leading up to the Civil War and that his books were outgrowths of his earlier writings; *Cannibals All!* represents a culmination of his earlier writings, including *Sociology for the South*. *Cannibals All!* Does not present anything that deviates dramatically from his earlier thought; it only tries to organize these thoughts in a

[133] Foner 69-70.
[134] Wish, 54 &61.
[135] George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960) xiv-xv.

more coherent manner.

Fitzhugh did believe the South should develop its own literature and thought he could help this cause. He corresponded quite regularly with abolitionists leading up to the release of *Cannibals All!* (1857) and used the dialogue with abolitionists to help refine his main arguments for the book. He even went as far as writing William Lloyd Garrison to provoke a response to the book.[136] The book was published by the same individuals who had published *Sociology for the South.* The title of the book came from Carlyle's *Latter Day Pamphlets*, which also critiqued capitalism. Thomas Carlyle was a Scottish philosopher who did not believe in capitalism and critiqued it vehemently. Carlyle did not think democracy and capitalism were the answer to society's problems and thought that social order was needed for society to function. Fitzhugh relied mostly on British journals to help illuminate the struggles of the free wageworker.[137]

Fitzhugh used an offensive strategy to make a compelling argument in the defense of slavery. Instead of defending the institution of slavery, he attacked the free labor system that was touted by the Republican Party and exposed its more distasteful side. The first chapter of *Cannibals All!* compared the "white slave trade" to the black slave trade. The "white slave trade" according to Fitzhugh was the exploitation of workers by those who owned all the capital. The worker traded his labor for the subsistence wages given by the owner of the capital. Fitzhugh believed that labor was more valuable than capital but felt that the free labor system allowed the owner of the capital to exploit this labor without compensating the worker for the product of his labor. Thus the black slave in Fitzhugh's mind received more compensation for his work in the form of food, shelter, and the "paternal" affection of his master than the free

[136] Wish, 166-169.
[137] Wish, 172-173.

laborer who only received the minimum amount of wages to live and was left to fend for himself and his family.[138]

To drive home his indictment of the free labor system, Fitzhugh used the words of socialists and the abolitionists themselves to describe the failures of the free labor system. Fitzhugh notes that socialists only appeared when free labor became the norm. He stated that socialist arguments "contained the true defense of slavery."[139] He then followed this up by stating, "although socialists have signally failed in the objects of their pursuits, they have incidentally hit upon truths, unregarded and unprized by themselves, which will be valuable in the hands of more practical and less sanguine men."[140] The problem he had with socialists was not their critique of free labor but their solution. He believed that their ideas of an egalitarian society were utopian and highly unrealistic.

Fitzhugh saved his harshest criticism for the abolitionists, naming all the well-known names like Horace Greeley, Gerrit Smith, and William Lloyd Garrison. He put them under trial and called them into court [Fitzhugh's analogy] because he believed that they were the South's best witnesses in defending slavery and condemning free society. He pointed out that the abolitionists wanted to abolish slavery but they also wanted to abolish marriage, parenthood, private property, and Christian churches. According to Fitzhugh, they wanted to reorganize northern society, which proved that abolitionists believed that free society in the North was a failure. He then took each abolitionist name by name and provided ample evidence that each of these abolitionists believed that free society did not work and must be changed.[141] Fitzhugh

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[138] George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960) 15.
[139] Fitzhugh, 21.
[140] Fitzhugh, 23. Although Fitzhugh acknowledges his indebtedness to socialists for their critique of free labor, there is no evidence that he knew Karl Marx.
[141] Fitzhugh, 85-97.

argued that the abolitionists were a product of free society and that their solutions to free society's problems would ultimately lead to no government whatsoever, complete individualism, and isolation.[142]

Fitzhugh then presented familial slavery as the perfect form of labor. Fitzhugh's familial slavery involved a close master-slave relationship where the slave worked hard for the master and the master in turn provided for all of the slave's needs. It was very much a form of paternalism. For Fitzhugh, this type of labor was the least exploitive and formed human associations, which Fitzhugh deemed crucial to any society.[143] Fitzhugh believed in a hierarchical society, which he said had existed throughout history. He did not believe in equality and that it was only natural that a few would rule while the rest would submit. To enforce this type of society, Fitzhugh believed in a strong state government that would regulate slavery and would help improve the infrastructure of the South to expand the economy.[144]

It is important to note that the substance of George Fitzhugh's argument was no different than proslavery theorists before him and the attempt to defend slavery in the abstract was consistent with the growing intensity of proslavery rhetoric in the 1850s. Many other proslavery defenders such as James Henry Hammond, Edmund Ruffin, and John C. Calhoun would attack the free labor system in a similar fashion. What set Fitzhugh apart from other proslavery theorists was his over-the-top style. The title *Cannibals All!* itself raises the eyebrow of the reader. Fitzhugh believed in presenting his argument in a shocking and provoking manner because he thought that this would be the most effective way for his book to sell and reach a wide audience. Fitzhugh admitted that he purposely made his writing 'odd, eccentric,

[142] Fitzhugh, 215.
[143] Fitzhugh, 30-31.
[144] Fitzhugh, 243-249.

extravagant, and disorderly.'[145] Drew Gilpin Faust, a respected southern historian, suggests that many modern scholars have studied Fitzhugh because of his provocative style and his flare for the dramatic. She says, "This modern interest in Fitzhugh may in part be a result of his very unrepresentativeness."[146] Of course, Fitzhugh's claim that slavery is good not only for blacks but for whites too, clearly distinguished him from his peers.

Historians such as Harvey Wish [his biographer] and C. Vann Woodward thought that Fitzhugh's argument was mainly propagandistic and should not be studied to understand the typical southern slaveholder's philosophy, but Eugene Genovese believes that Fitzhugh is crucial to understanding the principles that slaveholders believed in.[147]

Peter Kolchin admits that he is not the typical defender of slavery but that the substance of his argument did conform to other proslavery arguments.[148] It is hard for historians to agree on Fitzhugh's representativeness and importance because of his provocative style. Was it just propaganda or was he really putting forth a legitimate argument? These are important questions but they miss the point. Whether or not Fitzhugh represented Southern thought is only partially important. The greater importance lies in Northern perception of Fitzhugh's argument. Republican politicians and anti-slavery men viewed Fitzhugh's argument as representative of Southern thinking[149] William Lloyd Garrison devoted more pages in the *Liberator* to Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All!* than any other proslavery work.[150] This set the stage for a debate that

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[145] George Fitzhugh to George Frederick Holmes, 1855, in Holmes Papers, quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 18.
[146] Faust, 18.
[147] Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) 127.
[148] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery:1619-1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993) 195-196.
[149] Wish, 209-210. Foner, 66-67. Even Abraham Lincoln believed that Fitzhugh's writings were representative of Southern thinking. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 191.
[150] Wish, 200.

transcended an argument over slavery but was a battle over two distinct visions of what America should be. Republican ideology embodied many of the ideas of American exceptionalism while George Fitzhugh countered with an anti-exceptionalist argument. That is why Fitzhugh's proslavery thought is important to analyze. He provided the ultimate antebellum example of an anti-exceptionalist argument, which was ultimately unsuccessful in convincing his audience because it did not conform to an exceptionalist vision of America.

Fitzhugh attacked the notion of American exceptionalism through his main argument, failure of free labor. According to Fitzhugh, free laborers in America were not really free but were slaves of those who employed them or enslaved them, to use Fitzhugh's terminology. The laborer works for the profit of the employer while having little free time for himself. Fitzhugh notes, "when the day's labor is ended, he is free, but is overburdened with the cares of family and household, which make his freedom an empty and delusive mockery."[151] Also, the employer is under no obligation to pay for food, clothing, and shelter for the laborer. The laborer must live off of the meager amount of wages given to subsist. This is far from any ideal of individualism and self- sufficiency. The laborer has little independence according to this account.

Instead of describing free Americans as individualistic and independent, Fitzhugh portrayed them as worse off than African-American slaves. He explained this further by noting that men without property can never be independent. The ultimate piece of property is man himself, which through his labor brings value to the property of the employer. The free laborer has neither land property nor property in human beings. Therefore he is actually the asset of his employer and is free in name only.[152] Fitzhugh was attacking the ideas of American

[151] Fitzhugh, 15.
[152] Fitzhugh, 19-21.

Exceptionalism by trying to show that capitalism did not make individuals free but enslaved them at a higher price than chattel bondage. He argued that at least African-American slaves are fed, clothed and sheltered, while the master had an economic interest in taking care of his investment, which was not the case with free white labor.[153]

He also attacked the idea of egalitarianism, which was prevalent in American society and a large part of Republican ideology. He refuted egalitarianism by pointing out the lack of equality between the free laborer and the owner of the capital. He saw no ideal of equality in the north, but instead referred to the employers as Cannibals. He stated, "You are a Cannibal! And if a successful one, pride yourself on the number of your victims quite as much as any Fiji chieftain, who breakfasts, dines, and sups on human flesh."[154]

Fitzhugh also used history and lived experience to try to prove that egalitarianism or equality was unnatural for any society. He believed the state of revolution was "socially abnormal and exceptional" and the principles on which they were founded were "true in the particular, and false in the general."[155] He was referring to the founding of America. The idea of equality conflicted with government and property when not in a state of revolution, according to Fitzhugh. The very purpose of government was to have some type of hierarchy in place to preserve order. Rome and Greece were his models for how a government and society should operate.[156] He used an example of the military to show that ideas of equality do not work in a society that has a hierarchy in place. The father as head of the family is another example of

[153] Fitzhugh, 31.
[154] Fitzhugh, 17.
[155] Fitzhugh, 7-8.
[156] Fitzhugh, 8.

where equality did not make sense because it would undermine his authority.[157] Fitzhugh tried to use the very basic institutions of life to show that true equality cannot work in an ordered world.

To further prove that equality is an erroneous notion, Fitzhugh challenged both Locke and Jefferson. He said that man is not bound by contract as Locke would have us believe, but by nature to restricted liberty for the betterment of society. He denied any existence of "natural human liberty."[158] He was even harsher when dealing with Jefferson. He sarcastically agreed with Jefferson that all men have natural and inalienable rights, but quickly clarified that these rights are concerning "order" and "subordination".[159] He said, "We conclude that about nineteen out of every twenty individuals have a 'natural and inalienable right' to be taken care of and protected… they have a natural and inalienable right to be slaves."[160] Fitzhugh was clearly trying to show that nature, history and lived experience are quite different from the theories of revolutionaries; theories he believed to be irrelevant to everyday life. Instead, Fitzhugh argued for a society founded on truly conservative principles and a hierarchical system, which was the only type of society that could sustain slavery for a long period of time. He was denying the exceptionalist, egalitarian character of Americans while suggesting the alternative extreme of a slave society.

Along with his anti-individualism and anti-egalitarianism, Fitzhugh as mentioned earlier, also believed in a strong government to rule and protect the people. This is quite contrary to the belief of many Americans during the antebellum period. As Seymour Lipset points out, Americans were and are highly sensitive to any type of government authority, which was and is a

[157] Fitzhugh, 66.
[158] Fitzhugh, 71.
[159] Fitzhugh, 69.
[160] Fitzhugh, 69.

part of their individualistic tendencies.[161] Fitzhugh was in favor of more government, not less.[162] He proclaimed that the liberty party wanted to abolish all institutions, including: churches, legal system, government, and marriage. He believed that man was lawmaking and law abiding by nature and therefore these institutions must be kept in place.[163] Without these institutions society would become chaotic and unruly.

Fitzhugh traced the origins of the state's decline in England to the introduction of the House of Commons, which was the beginning of the end for governments based on rank. Selfish capitalists who did not have any concern about the welfare of their workers, only profits, operated the new type of government.[164] Fitzhugh wanted a government that was hierarchical but also concerned with the lives of its citizens. He described the Crown and church as natural allies of the laboring class. He went on to note that the English laborers replaced the rule of their king and church with a worse despotism, capitalists' interests.[165]

Fitzhugh also attacked the basic tenets of what America was theoretically founded on. He depicts the Bill of Rights and the Constitution as completely contrary to a stable government and thought that the American government would "be none the worse off" if the citizens threw away these documents and retained the established institutions that actually supported freedom.[166] He deemed the government itself, legitimate, but had little use for the abstract principles it was supposed to be based upon. When he discussed the necessities that begot government, he was referring to slavery, at least in the south. He compared the southern

[161] Lipset, 53.
[162] Fitzhugh, 94.
[163] Fitzhugh, 101.
[164] Fitzhugh, 107.
[165] Fitzhugh, 108.
[166] Fitzhugh, 133.

situation to Greece who also kept its society together by keeping slaves.[167] Fitzhugh tried to demonstrate that America's aversion to government and allegiance to abstract principles was a recipe for disaster. He especially thought this was the case for the south where slavery must be protected by a very conservative government, not one that is prone to change. Slavery was a benevolent institution that protected the weak and ignorant, but needed the support of a strong government to enforce it. His ideals of a powerful, conservative government completely countered the resistance to a strong central government that many Americans had. He knew that future Americans would have to change their beliefs about the role of government if slavery was to have a chance of surviving. Anti-statist attitudes do not correlate well with the institution of slavery, which needs a community and government effort to sustain it.

In keeping with American anti-statist attitudes, Americans also have never embraced socialism to the degree that Europe has. Its aversion to government interference has made it very hesitant to implement any socialist type programs.[168] This is true throughout American history and the antebellum period was no different. Fitzhugh was aware of Americans' aversion to socialism and used this fear to try and discredit abolitionists, who he associated with socialists, Mormonists, promoters of free love, and advocates of no government.[169] Not exactly flattering terms, but he was trying to get at a larger concern. Instead of debating abolitionists on the merits of slavery, he tried to offer the slave system as a viable option to what the abolitionist would offer if they had their way. He painted a picture of the abolitionist group who were just as unsatisfied with capitalism as he was, but instead of proposing a stronger government, they wanted to do away with all forms of government while redistributing the land and wealth. He

[167] Fitzhugh, 133-134.
[168] Lipset, 22.
[169] Fitzhugh, 214.

said that abolitionists see that all institutions such as the government, church, and family, restrict liberty, and therefore abolitionists want to remove them all.[170] He proposed slavery as the only solution stating, "the only cure for all this is for free society sternly to recognize slavery as right in principle, and necessary in practice, with more or less modification, to the very existence of government, of property, of religion, and of social existence."[171] He knew that Americans were against any significant form of socialism and they were not going to let anyone tear apart the family or interfere with their religious beliefs. His alternative was the system of slavery.

Possibly the strongest endorsement of an anti-exceptionalist argument was Fitzhugh's tendency to pine for days when there was a feudal society. He believed that the feudal system was actually better than a capitalist system. He constantly referred back to Medieval England as the standard of good institutions. He described antebellum America as a paradox. He thought Americans believed in a more liberal ideology but in practice they acted politically conservative.[172] He argued for America to accept a system that was tied closely with feudalism (slavery), but this was contrary to everything antebellum Americans believed in especially the political leaders of the North. Americans would never endorse a system they were proud to leave when they first arrived in America. Antebellum Americans lacked any connection to a feudal past, a monarchy, or aristocracy.[173] The one exception to this was wealthy slaveholders who saw themselves as aristocrats and lords of the manner.

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[170] Fitzhugh, 214.
[171] Fitzhugh, 215.
[172] Fitzhugh, 8.
[173] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; (reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1956) ed. Richard D. Heffner, 49-55. De Tocqueville was a French aristocrat who came to America for the specific reason of learning how a democracy worked. He spent nine months touring both the North and the South and was stunned by the great equality he observed and the lack of any aristocratic institutions. His observations about American democracy during this period were amazingly perceptive and political scientists still quote from De Tocqueville often.

Fitzhugh's anti-exceptionalist argument received criticism from both Northerners and Southerners. He received particular attention from William Lloyd Garrison. Fitzhugh's biographer mentions that Garrison gave more attention to *Cannibals All!* In the *Liberator* than almost any other work. Garrison stated:

> *Mr. Fitzhugh is the Don Quixote of Slavedom---only still more demented than his "illustrious* Predecessor." As the latter saw in a harmless windmill a giant of frightful aspect, and lustily assailed it with all the success possible under the circumstances, so the former sees in freedom a terrific monster which is devouring its millions, and valiantly essays to drive it from the earth.[174]

This sarcastic review of Fitzhugh's proslavery thought clearly illustrates that abolitionists rejected his argument completely, which is to be expected.

Besides abolitionists, there were Republican congressmen who used Fitzhugh to accuse the South of extreme proslavery views. On May 1, 1860, Representative Henry Waldron from Michigan made a speech about how the Democratic Party was derailing American democracy. He stated, "It [Democratic Party] no longer sympathizes with man, white or black, who is struggling to recover his rights or ameliorate his condition."[175] He quoted directly from Fitzhugh's writings and pointed to Fitzhugh's assertion that slavery was right for blacks and whites, which he found despicable. The Michigan Representative associated Fitzhugh's thought with the Democrats policy. He completely rejected it because he could not fathom how anyone in America could promote slavery for whites. Representative Ashley of Ohio also quoted directly from the writings of Fitzhugh in his speech that attacked slavery, the Democratic party's support of slavery, and the attempt by the Democrats, led by John C. Calhoun, to take over the

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[174] Boston *Liberator*, March 6, 1857. Quoted in Harvey Wish, *George Fitzhugh: Propagandist of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1943; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), 200.

[175] Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Waldron from Michigan speaking for the Homestead Bill, 36 Congress., 1st sess., *The Congressional Globe*, 1873.(1 May 1860) accessed Nov 2007, available from http://www.memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage; Internet

judiciary for the purpose of sustaining and expanding slavery.[176] Again Fitzhugh's comments about white slavery were mentioned and were linked to the Democratic Party. So we see a pattern of Northern Representatives linking Fitzhugh's thought to the Democratic Party, which emphasizes the importance of his writings upon the minds of some Northern politicians. It also shows how they used Fitzhugh for propaganda against Democrats.

If we turn our attention to the South we find that Fitzhugh found a friendlier audience who agreed with most of his principles, especially his critique of free society, but there were two main critiques that almost every reviewer mentioned. The first had to do with Fitzhugh's lack of organization and a propensity to cover too many topics. The second critique was the more crucial one. The Southern reviewers commented on the extreme conclusions that Fitzhugh came to and thought that he could benefit from more moderation. The reviewers never said exactly what these extreme conclusions were, but one can rightfully infer that they were referring to Fitzhugh's defense of not only black slavery but white slavery also.

One reviewer made the comment that Fitzhugh's writings were "a little fond of paradoxes, a little inclined to run a theory into extremes, and a little impractical."[177] James DeBow, who spoke highly of Fitzhugh's proslavery thought but does mention that "the author strains too far" at certain points of his argument.[178] Also, George Frederickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*

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[176] Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Ashley from Ohio speaking on the *Success of the Calhoun Revolution*, 36 Congress, 1st sess., *The Congressional Globe*, Appendix 375.(29 May 1860) accessed Nov2007, available from http://www.memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage; Internet. Also consult: Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Tappan from New Hampshire speaking on *Modern Democracy*, 34th Congress, 1st sess., *The Congressional Globe*, Appendix 954. (29 July 1856) accessed Nov 2007, available from http://www.memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage; Internet

[177] James D. B. DeBow, "Editorial Miscellany," in DeBow's Review, Vol 26 (1859), 481. Accessed 2 Oct 2007, available from http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c

[178] DeBow's Review of Fitzhugh, "Cannibals All! or Slaves Without Masters," *DeBow's Review*, Vol. 22 (1857), 543. Accessed 11 Sept 2007, available from http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c

explains that DeBow enthusiastically supported Fitzhugh's critique of free society but also agreed with Samuel Cartwright and Josiah C. Nott who defended slavery using anthropology that supposedly proved black men were inferior to whites, thus providing a foundation to argue for black enslavement only, which was too limited for Fitzhugh.[179] Other Southern reviewers also praised Fitzhugh's proslavery defense but again there were reservations. One reviewer took exception to Fitzhugh's attack on liberty. The reviewer went on to say that it was probably a misunderstanding of what liberty means to Fitzhugh compared to the reviewer.[180] George Frederick Holmes, a respected proslavery theorist who befriended Fitzhugh, used phrases like "too broadly asserted" and "want…of moderation" to describe Fitzhugh's argument.[181] Adding to these critiques in another review, Holmes expressed his regret that Fitzhugh "deviated into all manner of unnecessary disquisitions and extravagant heresies."[182]

Fitzhugh did receive mostly praise from the Southern intelligentsia despite their aversion to including whites as part of the "benevolent" institution. Possibly the most scathing Southern assessment came from Representative Etheridge of Tennessee who spoke eloquently against the reopening of the slave trade. He attacked the extreme wing of the Democratic Party who he accused of attempting to tear the Union apart by introducing the slave trade issue. He then quoted extensively from Fitzhugh's proslavery argument along with Southern newspapers who endorsed Fitzhugh's claims and made similar claims of their own.[183] He summed up his

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[179] George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 60-61.

[180] G.C. Grammar, "Failure of Free Society," *DeBow's Review*, Vol. 19 (1855), 31. Accessed 11 Sept 2007, available from http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pagereviewer-idx?c

[181] George Frederick Holmes, "Failure of Free Society," *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. 21 (1855), 129.

[182] George Frederick Holmes, "Slavery and Freedom," *Southern Quarterly Review*, Vol.1 (1856), 65.

[183] Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Etheridge from Tennessee speaking on the *Revival of the Slave Trade*, 34th Congress, 3rd sess., *The Congressional Globe*, Appendix 364-370. (21 February 1857) accessed Nov 2007, available from http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage; Internet.

thoughts about Fitzhugh and other southern proslavery advocates by stating:

> These opinions are advanced by southern Democrats. …As I said before, such opinions, if attempted to be enforced, will and ought to arouse the stern opposition of every free man in the South, who is not the victim of partisan madness or folly.[184]

It is important to make clear that Representative Etheridge was a former Whig now a part of the American Party but he made it perfectly clear that white Americans whether North or South would not accept an argument that trampled on the freedoms of free whites.

It is simple to see why Northern abolitionists and politicians would reject Fitzhugh's anti-exceptionalist argument. It is even more evident when one considers Republican ideology that embodied many of the ideas of American exceptionalism. The more complicated question is why didn't southern intellectuals and politicians accept Fitzhugh's full argument. Why were they willing to endorse his indictment of free society and his championing of slavery but could not follow him to the conclusion that whites should be enslaved? If slavery as an institution was preferable to free society, why exclude whites, especially poor whites. The answer lies in the theory put forth by the historian George Frederickson. Frederickson contends that Americans embraced a "Herrenvolk democracy," which is "democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups."[185] He believes that the South had a double mind. Americans bought into the excpetionalist ideas of individualism, egalitarianism, anti-statism, and an aversion to socialism, but only for those who were white. Fitzhugh's anti-exceptionalist argument ran contrary to the ideas of American exceptionalism but would have been acceptable, at least in the South, if he had kept his argument tailored to African Americans.

The Civil War changed many aspects of life and Fitzhugh had to endure these changes

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[184] Congress, House of Representatives, Representative Etheridge from Tennessee speaking on the *Revival of the Slave Trade*, 34th Congress, 3rd sess., *The Congressional Globe*, Appendix 369. (21 February 1857) accessed Nov 2007, available from http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage; Internet.

[185] Frederickson, 61.

just like many other southerners. In an ironic twist of fate, Fitzhugh took a position with the Freedman's Bureau in 1865.[186] Fitzhugh gradually accepted more racially charged views of the freedmen than he had entertained before the war and adopted the belief that blacks were inferior, which he had explicitly denied before the war.[187] He continued to write all the way up until 1872 and even came to endorse free labor as the optimal labor system.[188] This was a complete reversal of his proslavery thought before the war. He would end his life in utter poverty.

His sudden change in key ideas caused many historians to believe he was nothing more than a propagandist who made an argument for the sake of shock and for the sake of argument but it is hard to say exactly why Fitzhugh changed his views. The Civil War caused many to reevaluate their thinking. Nevertheless, it is not so much important if Fitzhugh was just a propagandist but whether or not Northerners took him seriously. It is pretty evident that some northern politicians and abolitionists believed Fitzhugh was serious and represented a large part of the slaveholding class. More importantly they seized on his rhetoric to portray the South in a certain light.

Fitzhugh used the anti-exceptionalist argument to try to persuade Americans that slavery was fundamental to American society and had always been so. He wanted to do away with any thought of egalitarianism or individualism, which he thought had led to the flawed system of free labor. He attacked some of the core tenets of American exceptionalism and offered a competing vision of familial style slavery where everyone is taken care of in some form or fashion. His argument for slavery gives the reader a clear insight into a line of argument that refuted any notion of American exceptionality and therefore was anti-exceptionalist in its nature and tone.

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[186] Wish, 313.
[187] Wish, 325-326.
[188] Wish 336.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The antebellum debate over slavery was in a larger context, a debate over American exceptionalism. Frederick Douglass and George Fitzhugh both exemplified the counter-arguments in the debate over American exceptionalism and slavery. The 1840s and the 1850s witnessed an expansion in both abolitionist and proslavery arguments that intensified as the Civil War drew near. No one during that time could have predicted with certainty that the Civil War would come but politicians and intellectuals knew that Southern slavery, and what to do with it, was not a question that was going to go away.

Frederick Douglass did not want the question of slavery to go away. He believed the more that the question was brought up, the better chance that America would eventually abolish it. Douglass's early speeches from 1841 to 1843 were mainly aimed at the American church, with tougher criticism of the Northern churches. He used a sharp tone to attack the hypocrisy of the Northern church that segregated blacks. He would continue to scold the American church as he eventually made his way to Ireland in 1845. His time in Europe allowed him to gain a larger perspective about slavery and America. His reception in Europe made him realize that he could be treated as an equal.

During his time in Europe, he used his speeches to place America in a larger

global context by contrasting American republicanism with England's monarchy, which seemed to show that England was more egalitarian than America when it came to slavery.
This was a strategy that many abolitionists used but Douglass had the unique perspective of a slave who had experienced Southern slavery, Northern racism, and European acceptance. He was more than qualified to speak of the exceptional hypocrisy of the American church, both North and South. Douglass painted America as exceptionally hypocritical as it chastised Europe for its monarchies but allowed slavery to flourish.

Douglass's American exceptionalist argument changed in tone and substance once he came back to the United States in 1847. It was a gradual shift that had even started before he left Europe, but became more pronounced as he made speeches in America. He still chastised America for being hypocritical but he started to acknowledge that America did start as a country that believed in freedom and equality for all. He used the Founders, and eventually the Constitution, to show how America was founded on unique principles and only needed to live up to them. He no longer just attacked America for being exceptionally hypocritical, but called on America to hearken back to its beginnings. He also warned that America would incur the wrath of God if it did not rid itself of slavery. The Puritanical belief in keeping God's covenant or punishment would come, was very apparent in Douglass's shift in his American exceptionalist argument.

George Fitzhugh epitomized the anti-exceptionalist argument that called for America to realize that it was not exceptional. He thought America should accept that people were not created equal and that slavery was the only institution that could deal
with this harsh reality. Fitzhugh's proslavery argument attacked at the core of Northern

beliefs in free labor. He thought it was much more exploitive than slavery. Fitzhugh wanted Americans to look to history and recognize that slavery had always existed, and for good reason. Many proslavery defenders extolled the virtues of slavery but weren't willing to go as far as Fitzhugh did. Without hesitation, Fitzhugh could argue for slavery for blacks and whites because he truly believed that equality and individualism were theories, not reality. He firmly believed that America was not exceptional and should embrace a more conservative approach.

Frederick Douglass and George Fitzhugh's arguments represent three core strains of the American exceptionalism argument that can be seen in the debate over slavery. Douglass's speeches embodied two different strains of the exceptionalist rhetoric, which was due to his evolving thoughts on America that changed gradually as he experienced Europe, broke away from Garrison, and eventually accepted the Constitution as a antislavery document. His speeches in the early years were harsh and accused America of being the most exceptionally hypocritical nation in the world because America allowed slavery and racism to thrive while it professed its unique status in the world. As he changed his mind on different issues of the day and responded to the growing crisis, his rhetoric also changed. His speeches from 1847 to 1852 show a clear pattern of accepting that America was exceptional in its inception and only needed to live up to their exceptional place in history. This is the second strain of the exceptionalist argument found in the slavery debate. Douglass argued that America could be the "city upon a hill" if it could abolish the one glaring stain on its record. Fitzhugh represented the anti-exceptionalist strand of the exceptionalist argument concerning slavery. Fitzhugh did not waver in his beliefs and strove to convince Americans that any thought of America asexceptional could be disproved by the very facts of history.

Historians have debated American exceptionalism exhaustively through the years, with neither side able to prove its case conclusively one way or the other. There is no doubt that they will continue to do so and will open up new areas of research much like Louis Hartz did over a half of a century ago. His arguments have in many ways been derided by historians who came after him, but the inquiries into American exceptionalism, or lack thereof, continues to expand. I argue that historians should focus more on how American exceptionalism was used by politicians and intellectuals during times of impending crisis to garner support for their cause. Frederick Douglass and George Fitzhugh are a great example of this.

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