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The Abolitionist Adventure, Part 3

by Wendy McElroy

National attention soon focused on whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state — a matter that affected the balance of power in the Senate. The immense Kansas-Nebraska territory had been formerly closed to slavery under the Missouri Compromise. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 — a deal struck by Stephen Douglas of Illinois to get Southern support for a railway in his state — nullified the compromise. Kansas was now up for grabs. Let the people decide, Douglas said. And so, resident voters would determine the slave status of new states carved from the territory. Pro- and anti-slavery forces flooded Kansas in an effort to influence the election. Violence erupted; voting irregularities were rampant.

The election in 1856 of President Buchanan, who was regarded as a friend to slavery, angered Garrison. In the first issue of its 27th year, *The Liberator* announced plans for a State Disunion convention to consider immediate disunion. A resolution revealed the change in abolitionist attitudes:

Resolved, that the sooner the separation takes place, the more peaceful it will be; but that peace or war is a *secondary consideration* in view of our present perils. Slavery must be conquered, peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.

The pacifism of a younger Garrison was gone.

Meanwhile, political alliances were also shifting. Some Northern Democrats, disgusted by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, had already defected and joined with others to form the Republican Party. Then, in 1860, a disorganized Democratic Party split its ticket, thereby throwing the election to the relatively unknown Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln. Southern reaction was dramatic: South Carolina led the way and seceded. Conflict at Fort Sumter prompted Virginia and other states in the upper South to follow suit.

Some historians view the secession as an overreaction. True, Lincoln had opposed slavery but he was an extreme gradualist, calling for its elimination over approximately 100 years. His main concern was to preserve the Union. Lincoln had declared,

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union.

Even if slavery was not the proximate cause of war, the abolitionists now viewed the war as an opportunity to end slavery. Garrison candidly replied to critics of his new war-spirit:

Well ladies and gentlemen, you remember what Benedict in the play says: “When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.” And when I said I would not sustain the Constitution because it was a covenant with death and an agreement with hell, I had no idea that I should live to see death and hell secede. Hence it is that I am now with the Government, to enable it to constitutionally stop the further ravages of death and to extinguish the flames of hell forever.

After Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, *The Liberator* became a virtual campaign sheet for Lincoln’s reelection. The Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in December 1865, thereby ending the constitutional support for slavery:

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

On December 29, 1865, Garrison composed the last issue of *The Liberator*:

The present number of *The Liberator* is the completion of its thirty-fifth volume, and the termination of its existence. I began the publication of *The Liberator* without a subscriber, and I end it — it gives me unalloyed satisfaction to say — without a farthing.... After having gone through with such a struggle as has never been paralleled in duration in the life of any reformer, and for nearly forty years been the target at which all poisonous and deadly missiles have been hurled. I might — it seems to me — be permitted to take a little repose in my advanced years.

Garrison pursued reforms until the end of his life. In April 1879, he was raising money to settle former slaves in Kansas when he fell ill. On May 23, the libertarian voice that had been “as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice” fell silent.

Conclusions

Was abolitionism a success or a failure?

This is a natural question to ask about any movement with a clearly stated goal, but it is difficult to answer, even if that goal — e.g., the elimination of slavery — was clearly achieved. The tensions caused by “the peculiar institution” may have been so deep that slavery would have been eliminated whether or not abolitionism had existed. Indeed, some economists argue that slavery was doomed because it was becoming economically unfeasible.

A better approach is to identify the contributions abolitionists made to the larger, ongoing debate about slavery. For decades, they were in the forefront of identifying the institution as primarily a moral issue, not one of political or economic expediency.

They also established non-violence as a major strategy to solve the social problems caused by slavery and racism. This included forming societies and schools that welcomed blacks as equals, defending the rights of free blacks and runaway slaves in court, providing sanctuaries from abuse for blacks, circulating anti-slavery literature at great personal risk, and tirelessly petitioning politicians for reform. In short, while much of the nation threatened each other and cut backroom deals, the abolitionists kept the principles in public view and focused on assisting individual victims.

Did abolitionism fuel the conflagration of war? Until the years immediately preceding the Civil War, abolitionism was probably the single strongest anti-war voice in America. Its nonviolent techniques enraged the South but it seems odd to blame those who expose a great evil for causing turmoil: that charge should be laid at the feet of those who do the evil and resist correcting it. Nevertheless, abolitionists did eventually join the call for war as a “solution” to slavery and they vigorously backed the Union effort.

Arguably, at that point, their support did not speed along a war that had become inevitable. But it did keep slavery in the forefront as a political focus. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, it was intended — in part — to shore up flagging support for the Union by asserting support for blacks. As inadequate as the Proclamation was, it is doubtful that black rights would have been given even that acknowledgement without the persistence of anti-slavery agitators. Moreover, after the war, abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips led the successful campaign to have black rights embedded in the Constitution through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments.

Could slavery have been eliminated without the bloodiest conflict America has ever experienced? Could the anti-slavery cause have succeeded through moral suasion or political compromise alone? Britain prohibited slavery in 1800 without bloodshed. Other nations accomplished the same. Only the United States required a civil war to end its peculiar institution. The circumstances within the United States may have dictated a violent outcome, or war may

have been an option too quickly chosen. In either case, abolitionism was one of the few political forces arguing for a change in the hearts and souls of men, not for bloodshed.

The success or failure of abolitionism must be judged against the broader question, what was possible? In confronting the most divisive issue in American history, slavery, abolitionism provided the voice of conscience. It assisted tens of thousands of individual blacks, steered the nation toward a recognition of universal rights, and was instrumental in embedding those rights into the Constitution.

Even the “mistakes” of abolitionism had interesting consequences. For example, because male abolitionists did not fight to include the word “female” in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments, the women’s rights movement was rekindled in a backlash of anger.

Abolitionism remains one of the most dynamic and powerful radical movements America has produced. William Lloyd Garrison and *The Liberator* remain its voice.

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