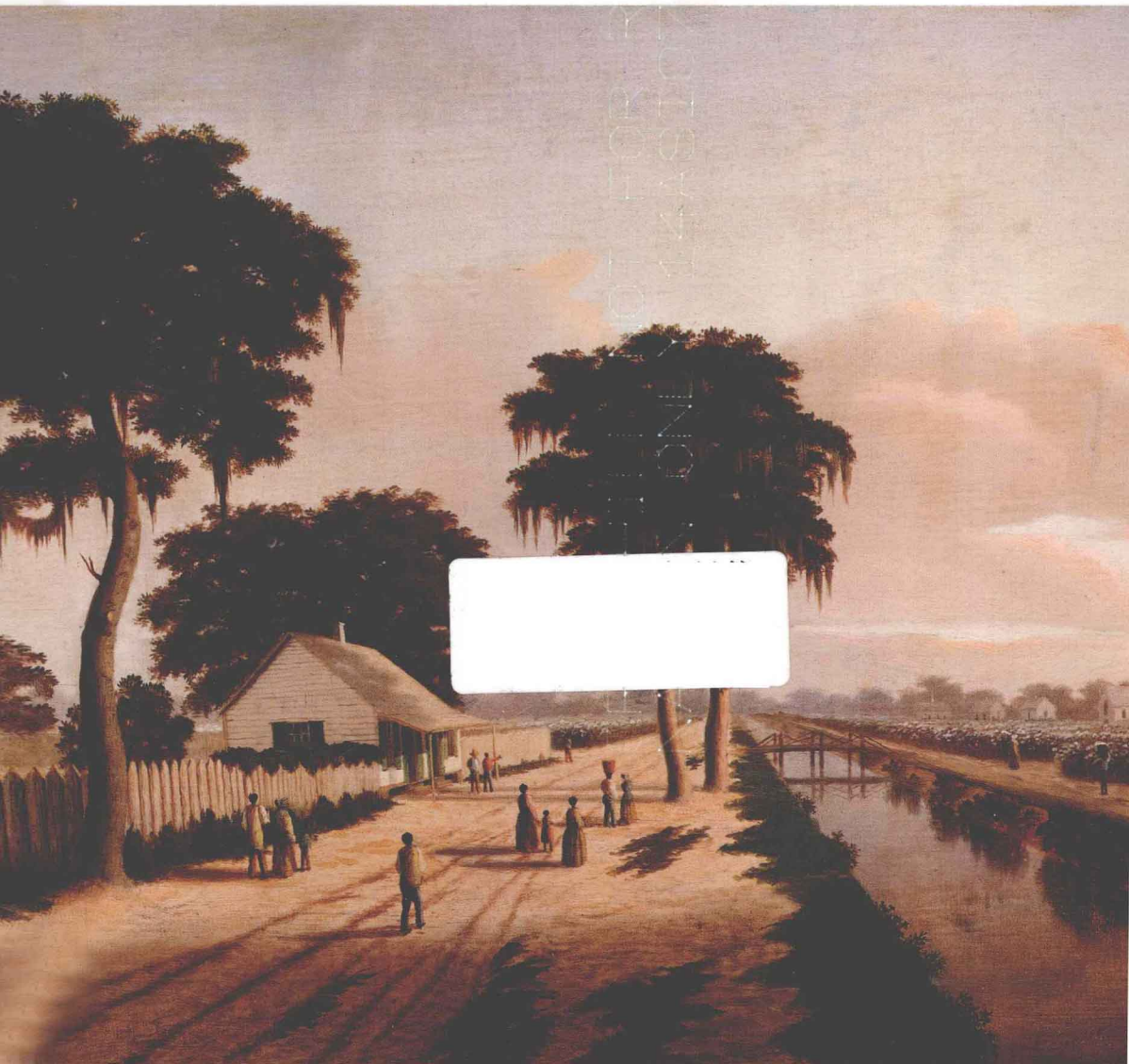


THIRD EDITION

# *Ordeal by Fire*

*The Coming of War Volume One*



*James M. McPherson*

# Ordeal by Fire Volume One

## *The Coming of War*

James M. McPherson, *Princeton University*

Third Edition



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# ERRITORIES



# About the Author

JAMES M. McPHERSON is George Henry Davis '86 Professor of American History at Princeton University, where he has taught since 1962. He was born in Valley City, North Dakota, in 1936. He received his B.A. from Gustavus Adolphus College in 1958 and his Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University in 1963. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, and a Seaver Institute Fellow at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California. In 1982, he was Commonwealth Fund Lecturer at University College, London.

A specialist in Civil War and Reconstruction history and in the history of race relations, McPherson is the author of *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1964); *The Negro's Civil War* (1965); *Marching Toward Freedom: The Negro in the Civil War* (1968); *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (1975); *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988); *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (1991); *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (1994); *Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (1996); and *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997).



*For Jenny*

# Preface

The Civil War was America's greatest trauma. More than a million of the three million men who fought it were killed or wounded; the republic that had been born in 1776 was also wounded and nearly killed by the conflict. In the end that republic healed stronger than ever because the radical surgery of war had removed the cancer of slavery. But the scars from this surgery have never disappeared. The issues that brought on the Civil War are with us yet: relations between whites and blacks, nation and states, North and South. Because of that, and because of its intense drama, its heroes and knaves, its record of grand events and awful violence, the story of the Civil War era remains the most crucial and compelling in American history.

This book explores the questions of how and why the United States broke apart and went to war in 1861. It delineates the social and economic structure of the antebellum republic, with special attention to the roots of conflict between North and South. It describes the rise in sectional tensions over the issue of slavery's expansion, from the annexation of Texas in 1845 to the election in 1860 of Abraham Lincoln as president—the event that triggered secession and war. It analyzes the main cause of war as a clash over the future of American society: would slavery continue to exist in this republic of freedom, or would the institution of bondage, as Lincoln hoped, be placed “in the course of ultimate extinction”? The political process could not resolve this life-and-death question; by 1861 both sides were willing to fight for what they viewed as the survival of their way of life.

This volume is intended for use in college courses in American history. It can be assigned in conjunction with the author's succeeding volume on America's *Ordeal by Fire*, Volume II: *The Civil War*. Or it can be assigned separately in courses on the antebellum era, on the Civil War, on Southern history, in the survey course, or in other courses.

## New Material

The decade that has passed since publication of the second edition of this volume has witnessed a continuation of the extraordinarily high level of interest in the Civil War and its causes. It has also been a decade of rich scholarship on the antebellum era, especially in the fields of social and cultural history. The updated and expanded bibliography at the end of this third edition bears witness to this outpouring of books. I have tried to incorporate this scholarship into my narrative of the coming of war. New in this third edition, brief outlines begin each chapter, providing students with an overview of what the chapter will cover, and a timeline of key events is provided at the end of the text. And as always, a new edition has provided the opportunity to correct a few minor errors that had somehow survived in or crept into the previous edition.



## Website

Also new for this edition is a website that provides helpful resources for instructors, including electronic versions of maps and images from the textbook. Learning tools for students, including quizzes and Web-based research exercises, are also available on the site.

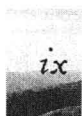
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*James M. McPherson*

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## Prologue

# The Setting of Conflict

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States grew at a rate unparalleled in modern history. This growth occurred in three dimensions: territory, population, and economy. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the nation's territory. The acquisitions of Florida (1810 and 1819), Texas (1845), and Oregon (1846) and the cessions from Mexico (1848 and 1854) nearly doubled it again. Population growth exceeded this fourfold increase of territory: the six million Americans of 1803 became twenty-six million by 1853. The economy grew even faster: during these fifty years, the gross national product increased sevenfold. No other country could match any single one of these components of growth; the combined impact of all three made the United States a phenomenon of the Western world.

This growth, however, was achieved at high cost to certain groups in North America. White men ruthlessly and illegally seized Indian lands and killed the native Americans or drove them west of the Mississippi. The land hunger of Americans provoked armed conflicts with Spaniards and Mexicans whose territory they seized by violence and war. American economic expansion was based in part on slave-grown tobacco and cotton. Born of a revolution that proclaimed all men free and equal, the United States became the largest slaveholding country in the world.

The social and political strains produced by rapid growth provoked repeated crises that threatened to destroy the republic. From the beginning, these strains were associated mainly with slavery. The geographical division of the country into free and slave states ensured that the crises would take the form of sectional conflict. Each section evolved institutions and values based on its labor system. These values in turn generated ideologies that justified each section's institutions and condemned those of the other.

For three-quarters of a century, the two sections coexisted under one flag because the centripetal forces of nationalism—the shared memories of a common struggle for nationhood—proved stronger than the centrifugal forces of sectionalism. But as early as 1787, conflict over slavery at the constitutional convention almost broke up the Union before it was fairly launched. To forestall Southern threats to reject the Constitution, Northern states finally accepted three compromises to protect slavery: a provision adding three-fifths of the slaves to the free population as a basis of representation in the lower house and in the electoral college (Article I, Section 2); a clause forbidding for twenty years the passage of a federal law to prohibit the importation of slaves (Article I, Section 9); and a clause requiring the return of slaves who escaped into free states (Article IV, Section 2).

In subsequent decades a powerful impetus for territorial expansion came from the South, which hoped to gain new slave states to counterbalance the more rapid population growth of the free states. The Louisiana Purchase, the annexation of Texas, and the conquest of the Southwest from Mexico were accomplished by Southern presidents and Southern-dominated congressional majorities over significant Northern opposition. Southern-born settlers tried unsuccessfully to legalize slavery in Indiana and Illinois, in defiance of the provision in the Northwest Ordinance banning the institution in the territories from which these states were formed.

Northern antislavery leaders produced their own counterthrusts to Southern maneuvers. In 1819, Northern congressmen tried to exclude slavery from the proposed new state of Missouri, part of the Louisiana Purchase. The ensuing sectional conflict in Congress provoked angry rhetoric and fears of disunion. The lawmakers resolved the impasse in 1820 by a compromise that admitted Missouri as a slave state but prohibited slavery in the remaining portion of the Louisiana Purchase that lay north of 36°30'.

The Missouri Compromise settled the question of slavery in the territories for a generation, until the Mexican War caused it to flare up anew. Before 1850, Congress admitted free and slave states alternately to the Union, enabling the South to maintain parity in the Senate (at fifteen slave states and fifteen free states by 1848) even though the region's slower population growth reduced the South to a permanent minority in the House and in the electoral college. The selection of Supreme Court justices by geographical circuits gave the slave states, with their larger territory, a majority on the Supreme Court. And the South's domination of the Democratic party allowed the section to wield political power out of proportion to its population. For two-thirds of the years from 1789 to 1861, the Presidents of the United States, the Speakers of the House and presidents pro tem of the Senate, and the chairmen of key congressional committees were Southerners.

But this Southern domination of national politics could not last forever. By 1860, the free states had a population of nineteen million, and the slave states just over twelve million. Four million of the latter were slaves. The election of a President by a Northern antislavery party in 1860 was the handwriting on the wall. To escape the perceived threat to their way of life, most of the slave states seceded and brought on a civil war.