

ORDEAL BY FIRE

Volume I

The Coming of War



SECOND EDITION



JAMES M. McPHERSON

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James M. McPherson

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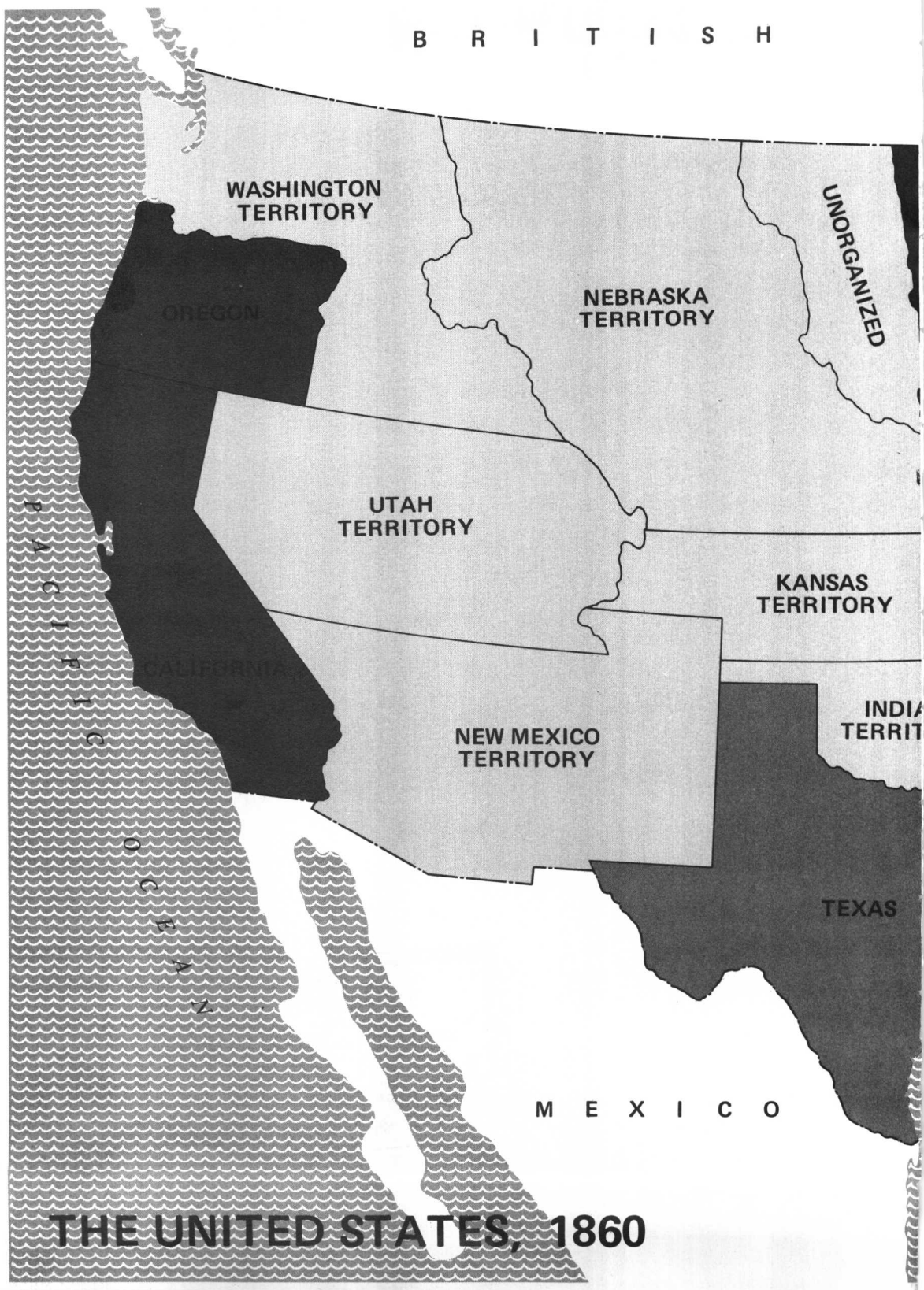
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T E R R I T O R I E S





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–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), and *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (1991).



For Jenny

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*A Note on
This Paperback Edition*

This volume is part of a separate printing of *Ordeal by Fire*, Second Edition, not a new or revised edition. Many teachers who have used the full edition of *Ordeal by Fire* have suggested separate publication of two of its parts—"The Coming of War" and "The Civil War"—as individual volumes for adaptation to various types and structures of courses. This edition, then, is intended as a convenience for those instructors and students who wish to use one part or another of *Ordeal by Fire* rather than the full edition. The pagination of the full edition is retained here, but the table of contents, bibliography, and index cover only the material in this volume.



Preface to the Second Edition

The decade that has passed since publication of the first edition of this book has seen an astonishing increase in the already high level of interest in the American Civil War. The number of Civil War Round Tables has doubled to a total of two hundred; hundreds of thousands of people watched reenactments of Civil War battles during the 125th-anniversary observances of those battles from 1986 to 1990; more visitors than ever have walked Civil War battlefields; a nationwide conservation movement has mobilized to preserve these battlefields from further commercial and residential encroachment; Civil War books reached the national best-seller lists and stayed there for months; millions watched the film *Glory*, which dealt with the black 54th Massachusetts Infantry, as well as the eleven-hour documentary *The Civil War* on public television. And new books about almost every conceivable facet of the Civil War era continue to pour from the presses.

I have tried to incorporate this scholarship into the second edition of *Ordeal by Fire*. While it has been a matter of quiet satisfaction that the main outlines of the story require little or no revision in the light of these new studies, I welcome the opportunity to refine or expand my treatment of several subjects that have been the focus of particularly intensive scholarship in recent years: the changing status of women during this era; the impact of economic growth on the antebellum working class; and the ambivalent position of nonslaveholding whites in a slave society.

In this edition I have also expanded the captions for many of the photographs and have added new illustrations. Citation endnotes have been moved to the bottom of the page to enable students more readily to identify my sources. I have updated the bibliography and added a new section on biographies.

I am grateful to many reviewers of the first edition as well as to colleagues, students, and other readers who have called to my attention minor errors, shaky interpretations, and ambiguous or misleading phraseology. Their suggestions have enabled me to correct, sharpen, and clarify the information and interpretations in this edition. I wish also to express my gratitude to the College Division of McGraw-Hill for maintaining the high standards of Knopf's College Division, and especially to my editor, Niels Aaboe, whose contribution has been invaluable.

James M. McPherson



Preface to the First Edition

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.

James M. McPherson



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A good many people and institutions have helped me produce this book. Students, colleagues, and lecture audiences over the years have knowingly or unknowingly helped to shape my knowledge and understanding of this era. The resources and staffs of the Princeton University Library and the Henry E. Huntington Library were indispensable. I am especially indebted to Martin Ridge, the late Ray Billington, James Thorpe, Virginia Renner, and Noelle Jackson for making my year of research and writing at the Huntington Library so pleasant and productive. Thanks must also go to the National Endowment for the Humanities and to Princeton University, which provided the funds and a leave for my year at the Huntington.

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Contents

A Note on This Paperback Edition xv

Preface to the Second Edition xvii

Preface to the First Edition xix

Acknowledgments xxi

Prologue: The Setting of Conflict 1

ONE American Modernization, 1800–1860 5

Changes in the Economy 5 Causes of American Modernization 11
The Modernizing Ethos 13 Modernization and Reform 15 Modernization
and Social Tensions 21 Political Parties and Modernization 23

TWO The Antebellum South 26

The Southern Economy 26 Slavery in the American South 34

THREE The Ideological Conflict over Slavery 42

The Antislavery Movement 42 Antislavery and Modernization 47
The Proslavery Counterattack 49 The Cavalier Image 52 Slavery and
National Politics 55

FOUR Texas, Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850 57

The Annexation of Texas 57 Manifest Destiny and the Mexican War 59
The Wilmot Proviso 62 The Election of 1848 65 The Compromise
of 1850 67 The Election of 1852 73

| | | |
|--------------|---|------------|
| FIVE | <i>Filibusterers, Fugitives, and Nativists</i> | 75 |
| | Manifest Destiny and Slavery in the 1850s 75 The Fugitive Slave Law 79 | |
| | Free Soilers and Free Blacks 84 Nativism and the Rise of the | |
| | Know-Nothings 86 | |
| | | |
| SIX | <i>Kansas and the Rise of the Republican Party</i> | 90 |
| | The Kansas-Nebraska Act 90 The Rise of the Republican Party 93 | |
| | Bleeding Kansas 95 The Election of 1856 99 | |
| | | |
| SEVEN | <i>The Deepening Crisis, 1857–1859</i> | 102 |
| | The Dred Scott Decision 102 The Lecompton Constitution 107 | |
| | The Lincoln-Douglas Debates 109 Portents of Armageddon, 1858–1859 112 | |
| | | |
| EIGHT | <i>The Critical Year, 1859–1860</i> | 117 |
| | John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid 117 The Democratic Party Breaks | |
| | in Two 121 The Republicans Nominate Lincoln 122 The Campaign 124 | |
| | The Outcome 129 | |
| | | |
| NINE | <i>Secession and the Coming of War</i> | 131 |
| | Secession of the Lower South 131 Secession: Revolution or | |
| | Counterrevolution? 133 The Northern Response to Secession 137 | |
| | Launching the Confederacy 141 The Upper South 142 Lincoln | |
| | Takes the Helm 143 Fort Sumter and the End of Peace 144 | |
| | | |
| | <i>Bibliography</i> | 151 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 175 |
| | | |
| | <i>PHOTOGRAPHS</i> | |
| | The changing status of women 19 | |
| | Slaves in the American South 37 | |
| | William Lloyd Garrison 46 | |
| | The Richmond Grays in 1859 54 | |
| | Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun 69 | |
| | Harriet Tubman 81 | |
| | Stephen A. Douglas 92 | |
| | Southern chivalry: argument versus clubs 97 | |
| | Roger Taney and Dred Scott 104 | |
| | John Brown 118 | |
| | Abraham Lincoln at home during the election of 1860 126 | |
| | William H. Seward 147 | |

MAPS

- The United States, 1860 ii–iii
- Principal canals in 1860 7
- Railroads in 1850 and 1860 7
- Principal staple crop regions of the South, 1860 29
- Percentage of slaves in total population, 1790 and 1860 32
- Counties carried by candidates in the 1856 presidential election 100
- Counties carried by candidates in the 1860 presidential election 128
- Principal military campaigns of the Civil War 184–185

TABLES

- 1.1 Origins of nineteenth-century American business executives and inventors 15
- 1.2 Religious affiliations of nineteenth-century business executives 15
- 1.3 Roll-call votes in seven state legislatures, 1832–1849 24
- 2.1 Percentage of urbanized population (living in towns of 2,500 or more) 27
- 2.2 Percentage of labor force in agriculture 27
- 2.3 Value of farmland and implements, 1860 27
- 2.4 Capital invested in manufacturing 27
- 2.5 Literacy and education, 1860 27
- 3.1 Origins of abolitionists and entrepreneurs 48
- 8.1 Voting in the 1860 election 129

FIGURES

- Inland freight rates 9
- Immigration to the United States 87

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 men 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.

The Coming of War