**"The 'Natural Limits' of Slavery Expansion" : By Harry Jaffa**

We have already cited the extraordinary statement by Professor Randall that Douglas's program "would inevitably have made Kansas free . . ." We have argued that, in so far as Randall relies for his judgment on the political effects of the doctrine of "popular sovereignty" taken by itself, he is utterly mistaken. For Douglas would have been powerless to resist Buchanan in 1857-58 without the Republicans in Congress, and there would have been no Republicans there if

Douglas's policy had been accepted in 1854; and there is no reason to believe that without the

continued opposition to Douglas by Lincoln in 1858 "popular sovereignty" would have resulted

in freedom in Kansas thereafter. But Randall's thesis, and the whole revisionist case, hinges

upon still another hypothesis. It is that causes other than purely political ones would in any case

have kept slavery out of Kansas and out of any other parts of the Union where it was not already

established. "By 1858 it was evident that slavery in Kansas had no chance," Randall writes.

"After that, as Professor W.O. Lynch has shown, 'there was no remaining Federal territory

where the conditions were so favorable to slavery.' The fight against the Lecompton proslavery

constitution was won not by reason of any debate between Lincoln and Douglas, but by the

logical workings of natural causes and by a specific contest in which, with 'the aid of

Republicans, he [Douglas] won the Lecompton fight.' Anyone reading Randall's text would, we

think, suppose that the article of Professor Lynch from which Randall has quoted, and which is

to be found in The Dictionary of American History, Volume IV, page 309, contains some

evidence to support the contention that "there was no remaining Federal territory where the

conditions were so favorable to slavery." In fact, however, Lynch's article contains nothing

whatever to the effect, except the bare assertion Randall has quoted. In Lynch's bibliography,

however, one finds listed the classic essay by Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Natural Limits of

Slavery Expansion," published in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review, October 1929.

So far as the present writer has been able to discover, this essay is the headwater from which has

flowed the "natural causes" thesis upon which Randall, Lynch, and other revisionists have based

their conviction that freedom in the territories was inevitable. This essay must be one of the most

influential works in American historical writing since the Civil War. What is remarkable is its

acceptance by Northern historians, because the author is one of the most redoubtable and

uncompromising apologists of the Southern cause. Like most Southern apologists since the

Civil War, he does not think slavery was the real issue. The "positive good" theory was only the

reaction to abolitionism--on which Southerners blame everything for which no apology can be

found--but, according to Ramsdell, abolitionists or not, "There can be little doubt that the

institution of chattel slavery had reached its peak by 1860 and that within a comparatively short

time it would have begun to decline and eventually have been abolished by the Southerners

themselves." Why the South fought so desperately to preserve an institution it was about to

abolish may be hard to understand. Ramsdell, of course, would say they were fighting for the

rights of the states which, unlike the Union, were worth fighting for.

A man may always be pardoned, and even admired, for making a spirited defense of the cause of

his forefathers. But to see the "natural causes" thesis pass from an old Confederate like Ramsdell

to a "Constitutional Unionist" like Randall and then to an "Abolitionist" like Hofstadter is as

bewildering as it is stimulating. The following occurs in a note to Hofstadter's essay on Lincoln.

"Historians are in general agreement with such contemporaries of Lincoln as Clay, Webster,

Douglas and Hammond, that the natural limits of slavery expansion in the continental United

States had already been reached." We have italicized the phrase which shows the title of

Ramsdell's essay passing into Hofstadter's language almost as a truism. Strangely neither

Hofstadter, in his three-page, fine-print bibliography, or Randall, in his bibliography of over

fifty pages appended to the second volume of Lincoln the President, lists the Ramsdell

"Natural Limits" essay. This is the more surprising because both list Ramsdell's far less

consequential essay blaming Lincoln for the firing on Fort Sumter. Yet Randall disagrees with

the Sumter piece, which he lists, and agrees with the "natural limits" piece, which he does not

list. And the firing on Sumter, important as it is as an episode, can hardly be compared in

importance with the question of the reality of the slavery-extension issue, which was the avowed

political cause of secession. Can it be that Randall and Hofstadter do not wish to acknowledge

their debt to the Southerner, even when he helps them damn Lincoln, who was neither

secessionist, constitutional unionist, or abolitionist? So far as we know, it is Ramsdell, and not

Clay, Webster, Douglas, or Hammond, whom recent historians have followed. As for Clay and

Webster, we do not know what evidence Hofstadter has--since he gives none--that they believed

slavery to have reached its "natural limits" in the continental United States. During the Senate

debates on the Kansas-Nebraska bill in the spring of 1854, Chase, Summer, Seward, and other

of its opponents proved beyond a peradventure--as Lincoln was to do in his Peoria speech the

following fall--that the compromisers of 1850--certainly the Whig compromisers--had no

territories in mind but those acquired from Mexico. Webster's celebrated seventh of March

speech, as we have shown in an earlier chapter, only referred to former Mexican soil, from

which all antislavery men, and Douglas, believed it was banned by Mexican law, until such time

as there was a positive enactment sanctioning slavery by American authority, So far as we know,

neither Clay nor Webster ever said, or implied, that slavery would not expand anywhere in the

continental United States if all legal prohibitions were withdrawn. Clay and Webster did,

however, speak of natural causes keeping slavery out of the Mexican Southwest. In this sense

they did propound a "natural limits" theory of a sort. However, there was a vast difference for

statesmen to propound such a belief to gain acceptance of a specific legislative measure and for

scholars to employ it as a general theory for the interpretation of history. As we shall shortly

show, the concept of a natural limit to slavery is, as a scientific theory, false and should never

have commanded the assent of any reflecting person. Certainly no one who has read Lincoln's

speeches, where it is thoroughly refuted, should have entertained it for a moment. As

propounded by Webster, Clay, and Douglas in 1850, it meant only that is was improbable that

slavery would go into such a place as New Mexico Territory in the foreseeable future. the

justification for Webster is that he used a plausible but specious argument to persuade the North

to forgo the Wilmot Proviso, because he believed that the Compromise of 1850, taken as a

whole, was a Union-saving measure, in the interest of the entire country. And the compromise

would have been impossible if the Proviso demand had been insisted upon by the North. The

idea that God and nature would keep slavery out of the newly acquired Southwest was an

argument addressed to the North and designed to make palatable a concession which, in any

case, was being paid for by Southern concessions as the admission of California as a free state.

It is almost inconceivable that Webster or Clay would have accepted the "natural limits" theory to defend the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which was a wholly gratuitous, uncompensated concession to pro-slavery opinion. But even if Webster's argument was more plausible than we believe it ever was, there is no excuse for historians repeating it, nearly a century afterward, when experience has revealed its utter hollowness. For in 1859, as we have already noted, the territorial government of New Mexico actually passed a slave code for that vast region. The revisionists, we are aware, would reply that, even with the slave code, slavery did not go into New Mexico. To this we would rejoin that the sectional crisis came to a head barely a year after the code was passed and that the election of Lincoln persuaded most slaveowners not to venture forth in any direction with their property until the secession issue was settled. The following is from a letter written by the Secretary of the New Mexico Territory to an acquaintance in Washington on August 16, 1858, during the thick of the Lincoln-Douglas campaign:

*"It is generally believed here that the territorial legislature will pass some kind of a slave code for the territory at the next session. It is true that we have few slaves here, but Otero [New Mexico's*

*delegate to Congress] has let it be known tha t if N.M. expects any favors from Wash. [i.e.,*

*from the Buchanan administration], a slave code would be a wise move. The governor and most*

*to the other officials are favorable to it . . . We have assured the Mexicans that it will protect their own system of peonage . . ."*

So much for the way in which political causes supplemented "natural causes" in helping "popular sovereignty" along. But less that ten years after Webster had declaimed so about God and nature forbidding slavery in New Mexico, we find such sentiments as the following, expressed in a letter by an Associate Justice of the territory, a native New Englander, to the Attorney General of the United States, February 14, 1859: *"this body has passed a law for the protection of slave property in the territory. This was necessary, for the truth is I do not see how Americans are going to get on here without slavery. It can't be done. The Peons are not worth their salt and all other labor is unattainable. Slave labor can be made very profitable by cultivating the soil, and I will venture to say that a man with a half dozen Negroes would make a fortune at the present prices of produce . . . and grains. The soil in the bottoms is very rich and productive. You must not place any credence in the story that slave property could not be made available here."* It is our impression that the word "available" in the last sentence is employed in the somewhat archaic sense of "useful," or "capable of succeeding," as an "available" candidate for office.

However, to anyone who, like Professor Hofstadter, still takes the Webster argument of 1850 seriously, we offer the foregoing as expert testimony from someone on the spot to the effect that the soil and climate argument, as applied to New Mexico, was nothing but what Lincoln called a "lullaby." Another reason why there were few slaves in New Mexico is that just before the war slave prices were skyrocketing. They were in such demand in the older slave lands that it was almost impossible to buy them for the newer lands.

We should note, moreover, that while the New Mexican legislature was passing a slave code, it

also passed a series of measures to strengthen the system of peonage. Ramsdell and others have

maintained that the cheapness of Mexican labor made Negro slavery unlikely in the Southwest.

In fact, however, the two systems helped each other. Negro slavery helped to reinforce

peonage--or would have if it had remained available as an alternative source of labor. The worst

effects of peonage, which was scarcely better than slavery, would have been impossible to

ameliorate if slavery had continued to exist nearby. And Lincoln's whole point was that, where

men were free to introduce slavery, an alternative labor system was bound to be depressed to a

condition approximating that of the slaves. To sum up: the "natural limits: and "popular

sovereignty" theories had their prime test in New Mexico, and what was happening there even as

the Lincoln-Douglas debates were in progress vindicated Lincoln's contentions during the

debates. Ramsdell's essay is very persuasive in establishing a very limited proposition; viz., that

by 1860 the traditional southern plantation system of cotton culture had extended about as far as

it was likely to extend within the existing boundaries of the United States. He does except some

large areas of Texas, which the railroads had not yet made accessible to markets and which were

also unusable until the invention of the barbed-wire fence made the fields immune to the

depredations of cattle, because the lands in question were far from fencing timber. But

Ramsdell's essay proves nothing whatever as to the possibility of slavery being extended by the

employment of slaves in other occupations. Nor does it prove that any existing limitations were

permanent limitations. It is precisely this last point at which Lincoln took aim when he employed

one of his most oft-repeated and prescient arguments in the joint debates. We take the text from

the last joint debate at Alton 2, although he said substantially the same thing at Springfield, July

17, 1858, and at Jonesboro and Quincy in the joint meetings, as well as in innumerable speeches

on the stump. "Brooks of South Carolina once declared that when this Constitution was framed,

its farmers did not look to the institution existing until this day." When he said this, I think he

stated a fact that is fully borne out by the history of the times. But he also said they were better

and wiser men than the men of these days; yet the men of these days had experience which they

had not, and by the invention of the cotton gin it became a necessity in this country that slavery

should be perpetual. "I now say that . . . Judge Douglas has been the most prominent instrument

in changing the position of slavery . . . and putting it upon Brook's cotton-gin basis . . . "

"Brooks's cotton gin basis" means a basis in which any possibility to make profit from the

Negro is not to be prevented by any considerations of the Negro's rights. But it means still more.

It means that the expectation of the Fathers, an expectation based on the economic prospects of

slavery before the invention of the cotton gin, was utterly confounded by the invention of the

cotton gin. If Professor Ramsdell had written an essay on the "natural" limits of slavery in 1790,

he would have seen those limits utterly destroyed before the end of 1791. If, then, a human

invention can completely overturn limits set by "nature," nature is a most fickle thing to rely

upon. In short, the idea of a "natural" limit to the human institution is, as we have maintained, an

absurdity. One invention had completely altered the prospects of freedom of millions of human

beings. The mid-nineteenth century was very self-conscious of the rapid technological changes

that were revolutionizing the conditions of human life. Lincoln himself lectured on science and

inventions after the campaign against Douglas and had patented an invention of his own.

"Brook's cotton-gin basis" therefore implied the following further questions: shall we permit the

institution of human slavery to be revolutionized by any future technological development? Shall

human rights be the slave of technology, or shall technology be the slave of human rights?

Without a moral decision against slavery no guarantee for the future was possible. Certainly there is no scrap of evidence in Ramsdell's essay that there was in 1860 any more of a guarantee

against the expansion of slavery than that which existed in 1790. That slavery was wedded, by

and large, to cotton in the antebellum South may be true. But this is to be explained by the

extraordinary profitability of cotton culture and proves nothing as to the possibility of the

exploitation of slave labor in other fields of human production. That Negro slavery could be

maintained only in connection with the simpler forms of unskilled field labor is a myth

contradicted even by those who spread it. Ramsdell himself refers to "Negro mechanics . . .hired

at high wages." He does not say these were slaves, but it is notorious that many were--as well as

that their owners kept most of their wages. Kenneth Stampp, in his admirable recent survey,

The Peculiar Institution, says that although, for obvious reasons, the bulk of the slaves were

employed in cotton and similar agricultural pursuits, "In 1860, probably a half million bondsmen

lived in southern cities and towns, or were engaged in work not directly or indirectly connected

with agriculture," and that "in spite of the protests of free laborers," they "worked in virtually

every skilled and unskilled occupation." And as revealing as words can be of the truth of

Lincoln's proposition is the following: "Some Southerners were enthusiastic crusaders for the

development of , factories which would employ slaves. They were convinced that bondsmen

could be trained in all necessary skills [for which conviction there was abundant empirical

evidence] and would provide a cheaper and more manageable form of labor than free whites.

Professor Stampp also gives an example of a famous iron company in Richmond, Virginia,

which introduced slaves into its labor force in the 1840's, with the result that the free laborers

eventually struck in protest. Then the manger, like countless managers since, "vowed he would

show his workers that they could not dictate his labor policies: he refused to re-employ any of the strikers." Thereafter the company employed only slaves. When Lincoln made his New England tour in March 1860, after the Cooper Union speech, he came to New Haven, Connecticut, in the midst of a shoe strike. The strike was, in part, occasioned by the loss of Southern business by reason of an attempt to apply pressure, via the boycott, upon Republican businesses and businessmen. Yet Lincoln grasped this nettle firmly when he said: "I am glad to see that system of labor prevails in New England under which laborers can strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them or not! I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere. One of the reasons I am opposed to Slavery is just here." Southern apologists who speak of a "natural limit" to slavery are really thinking not of economic "nature" but of the nature of the Negro. What they seem to assume, perhaps half consciously, is that the Negro is a kind of domestic animal, limited in usefulness like a horse or a mule. Lincoln's fundamental objection to the whole "soil and climate" thesis stemmed from his simple assumption that the Negro was a man and that as such he was capable of being exploited in any way that human labor might be exploited. Any break in the legal barriers confining slavery was a threat to free labor, because slave labor could be used to degrade free labor wherever there was a legal possibility to their being used side by side. Slavery, moreover, was a protean institution, as Professor Stampp's recent book convincingly shows. There were many forms that the relationship of master and servant could and did take, and there is no reason to suppose that, should slavery in the mines, foundries, factories, and fields of the free states have proved advantageous to powerful groups therein, new systems of discipline might not have been

invented to make the exploitation of slave labor highly profitable. The totalitarian regimes of the

twentieth century provide us with ample evidence of the variety of ways that this might have been done.

Even if it were true that the productivity of a system based on free labor is greater than one

based on slave labor, it does not follow that it is more profitable to the men who run it. a large

portion of a smaller sum may still be more than a small portion of a larger one. All we know of

the fierce struggles, the long uphill climb, of free labor in the grip of the industrial revolution that followed the Civil War suggests that it never could have succeeded, as it has, if in addition to all other handicaps the incubus of slavery could have been placed in the scales against it. If the great corporations, the "robber barons" who came to dominate the state legislatures (in the postbellum period, had wanted to import slaves as strikebreakers, then it would not have required even another Dred Scott decision to spread slavery to the free states. It is simply unhistorical to say that such a thing couldn't have happened because it didn't happen. It didn't happen because

Lincoln was resolved that it shouldn't happen. And nothing but his implacable resolve made it impossible.

The thesis that slavery would not have gone into the territories, whether it was prohibited by law

or not, is the fundamental thesis of revisionism in dealing with the political causes of the Civil

War. But this thesis is itself a subordinate manifestation of an apology for the South which has

received a classic formulation in the work of Ramsdell. The main thesis of this apology, which

we have already given in Ramsdell's words, is that slavery as an economic institution has

reached its peak in 1860 and was about to decline. Gradual emancipation was "just around the

corner," if only the Republicans had not placed the South on the defensive. This contention has

recently received its most detailed and circumstantial refutation in a monograph written under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research by two Harvard economists, Professors Alfred H. Conrad and John Meyer. "The Economics of Slavery in the Antebellum South," published in the Journal of Political Economy, April 1958, is the most enlightening piece of original research we have encountered on the slavery question. According to the authors, this

study is the first attempt to measure the profitability of slavery according to the economic, as

opposed to the accounting, concept of profitability. The debate over the profitability of slavery,

they note, has been conducted in terms of a variety of accounting methods, usually shaped to

prove the debaters' contentions and seldom comparable one with another. Conrad and Meyer

have attempted to measure the profitability of Southern slave operations in terms of modern

capital theory. And what they have concluded is that the rate of return on male slave capital

employed in the field ranged between 5 and 7 per cent in the majority of antebellum cotton

plantation operations, while the rate on female slave capital, from both field work and

procreation, averaged 8 per cent. These returns, they say, compare favorably with contemporary

returns of 6 to 7 per cent on genuinely alternative investment opportunities. Slavery, they

maintain, was profitable to the whole South, the continuing demand for labor in the cotton belt

ensuring returns to the breeding operations on the less productive land in the seaboard and border states. The breeding returns were necessary, however, to make the plantation operations on the poorer lands as profitable as alternative contemporary economic activities. The failure of

Southern agriculture on these poorer lands in the post-bellum period is probably attributable,

mainly to the loss of capital gains from slave breeding and not to the relative inefficiency of the

tenant system that replaced plantations or the soil damage resulting from the war. This last point,

we observe, is of great importance. It is a reply to those who charge the freed Negroes with

incapacity as agriculturists when separated from their old overseers. What the freed Negroes

were unable to do to compete with the old plantation system was to sell themselves to balance

their budget! Shades of Swift's "Modest Proposal!" The Conrad and Meyer work is striking for

its data on the importance of slave breeding to the entire slave economy. As they mention, this

was something that Southerners, then and since, have gone to great lengths to deny and to

conceal. We may recall that Douglas in 1849 had expected all the border states, from Missouri to

Delaware, to adopt schemes for gradual emancipation. If soil and climate in these states had been

the sole determining factor, his expectation might have been correct it.

But the Conrad and Meyer work shows that the employment of slaves in these states, plus the sale of the surplus Negroes raised there, maintained the profitability of slavery there. The South, they note, had developed a price structure for slaves and efficient market mechanisms for transferring slaves. Because of this no argument based on the soil and climate in a region which did not take into account the profits from breeding can be accounted adequate. Thus, they further conclude that continued expansion of slave territory was both possible and, to some extent, necessary. The maintenance of profits depended, they say, upon either intensive or extensive expansion. Intensive expansion, we would add, could only mean greater use of more skilled slaves, and this encouraged the use of slaves in the kinds of farming supposedly reserved for the yeoman farmers of the West. As to the alleged inefficiency of slave labor in all but certain kinds of farming, Conrad and Meyer are, like Stampp, entirely unimpressed. They note that slaves were employed in cotton factories throughout the South, in coal mines, in lumbering, and in iron works (as already noted), and they say that Southern railroads were largely built by slaves. In short, there is almost nothing to suggest that slaves, like free Negroes since the Civil War, might not have gone almost anywhere the law and the whites allowed, doing any work white men did, if given the chance.

In concluding this portion of our argument, we would merely note that the Conrad and Meyer

paper is not only a refutation of the Ramsdell "natural limits" theory, but it is a vindication of

another argument that Lincoln used, with ever greater emphasis, as the Civil War approached. In

commenting on the difficulties of finding support for a plan of gradual emancipation and

colonization, he had observed at the end of his Dred Scott speech, "The plainest print cannot be

read through a gold eagle; and it will be ever hard to find many men who will send a slave to

Liberia, and pay his passage, while they can send him to a new country, Kansas for instance,

and sell him for fifteen hundred dollars, and the rise.

And in the New Haven speech, from which we have quoted above, Lincoln also

spoke as follows: "The owners of these slaves consider them property. The

effect upon the minds of the owners is that of property, and nothing else-it

induces them to insist upon all that will favorably affect its value as property, to

demand laws and institutions and a public policy that shall increase and secure

its value, and make it durable, lasting and universal . . .The slaveholder does

not like to be considered a mean fellow . . . and hence he has to struggle within

himself and sets about arguing himself into the belief that Slavery is right. The

property influences his mind. The dissenting minister, who argued some

theological point with one of the established church, was always met with the

reply, 'I can't see it so.' He opened the Bible, and pointed him to a passage, but

the orthodox minister replied, 'I can't see it so.' Then he showed him a single

word--'Can you see that?' 'Yes, I see it,' was the reply. The dissenter laid a

guinea over the word and asked, 'Do you see it now?' So here, whether the

owners of this species of property do really see it as it is, it is not for me to say,

but if they do, they see it as it is through 2,000,000,000 of dollars, and that is a

pretty thick coating.

The necessity for the expansion of slavery, and the reality of the need for new lands, if the value

of that multi-billion dollar investment was to be safeguarded, was implicitly confessed by

Douglas himself in his last rejoinder in the joint debates (at Alton Lincoln's idea) said Douglas,

"is that he will prohibit slavery in all the territories, and thus force them all to become free states, surrounding the slave states with a cordon of free states, and hemming them in, keeping the slaves confined to their present limits whilst they go on multiplying until the soil on which they live will no longer feed them, and he will thus be able to put slavery in a course of ultimate extinction by starvation."

Of course, Douglas did not entertain the thought that the schemes of emancipation proposed by Jefferson might be revived again, even by Southerners, once the confinement of slavery lowered the rate of return upon slaves. Certainly schemes of compensated emancipation would stand a chance if the compensation was for an investment of dwindling value. In this sense Douglas has

accurately stated Lincoln's purpose. But it is difficult to comprehend how anyone could have said, as Professor Randall has, that in 1858 "big and fundamental things about slavery and the Negro were not on the agenda . . ."

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Source: Jaffa, Harry "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," The House Divided: The Case for Lincoln

(New York, 1956), pp.