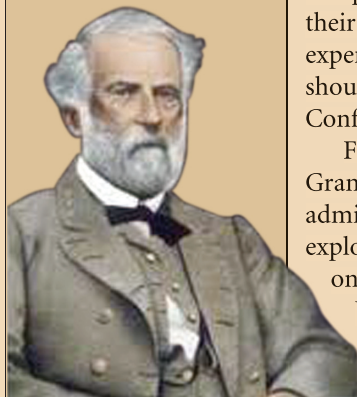


Fellow Southerners!

by Gordon Rhea



▲ Chancellorsville, perhaps the Army of Northern Virginia's finest battle.



This year initiates the American Civil War's Sesquicentennial, an occasion for serious reflection on a conflict that killed over 600,000 of our citizens and left many hundreds of thousands emotionally and physically scarred. Translated into today's terms—our country is ten times more populous than it was in 1861—the dead would number some 6 million, with tens of millions more wounded, maimed, and psychologically damaged. The price was indeed catastrophic.

As a historian and a Southerner with ancestors who fought for the Confederacy, I have been intrigued with why my forebears felt compelled to leave the United States and set up their own nation. What brought the American experiment to that extreme juncture? And how should we modern Southerners regard our Confederate ancestors?

For almost three decades, I have studied Grant's and Lee's battles in the spring of 1864. I admire the Army of Northern Virginia's military exploits; outnumbered better than two-to-one, General Lee and his army thwarted their Union opponent at every turn in battles

◀ Robert E. Lee (1807-1870)

from the Wilderness through Cold Harbor. Lee's resilience, ingenuity, and ability to inspire his troops stand as examples for generals of any era.

I am also awed by the war service of my great grandfather, Captain James David Rhea, who commanded a company in the Confederate 3rd Tennessee regiment and survived hardships that are difficult to fathom. He was captured at Fort Donelson; escaped to fight at Franklin, Vicksburg, Port Hudson, Chickamauga, and Chattanooga; was wounded during the Atlanta campaign, but recovered in time to rejoin his unit for Franklin, Nashville, and Bentonville. "He spent some weeks of his campaign out in the swamps, during which time he came near starving," Captain Rhea's obituary in the *Confederate Veteran* magazine reported. After the surrender at Durham Station, he walked back to his war-ravaged farm in southern Tennessee and started life anew.

I admire Captain Rhea's personal bravery and the suffering he endured, just as I respect the fighting qualities of the Army of Northern Virginia and its skillful leader. The sesquicentennial, however, affords us Southerners an opportunity to look beyond the

deeds of individual soldiers and the masterful battles waged by Confederate armies, and to dwell on a deeper issue. It is time that we modern Southerners acknowledge that Confederate soldiers were cogs in the military arm of the Confederate States of America, a government founded for the avowed purpose of preserving human slavery and fostering that institution's propagation into new territories. While I respect Captain Rhea's bravery, I cannot be proud of the cause that his nation represented and for which he risked his life. And I'm very glad that his side lost.

The Civil War was certainly not the first time in history—nor, I suspect, will it be the last—that good people fought valiantly for disgraceful causes. Men since time immemorial have answered their nation's call to arms and discharged their patriotic duty irrespective of the justness of their nation's political agenda. A host of reasons motivated Southerners of the Civil War era to become soldiers, including concepts of duty, honor, and manhood; protection of home, family, and the Southern way of life; religious convictions; ties with communities and friends; conscription; and a broad range of ideals and influences. But by joining the Confederate war machine, all of them, irrespective of their personal motivations, advanced their nation's political agenda—the perpetuation and territorial expansion of human bondage and the misery that it entailed.

I want to caution my fellow Southerners against sugar-coating the Confederacy's purpose and urge you to squarely confront the reasons the new nation's founders articulated for its existence. The short answer to why our ancestors decided to leave the United States, of course, was Abraham Lincoln's election and his opposition to the expansion of slavery into the territories. If new states could not be slave states, then the South's political clout would fade, abolitionists would be ascendant, and the South's "peculiar institution"—the right to own human beings as property—would be in peril.

And so, seven score and ten years ago, our Confederate forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation dedicated to the principal that all men are not created equal; that some people have the right to own other people; that the owners deserve unfettered discretion to buy and sell the owned, to separate

husbands from wives, children from mothers, and to administer beatings, whippings, and other punishments at will; and that the proper role of government is to protect and nourish this social arrangement. While the rest of the western world followed an historic trajectory dedicated to abolishing slavery and expanding the concepts of human rights, individual liberty, and participatory democracy, our forefathers marched off in an opposite direction.

The Confederacy's founders were unabashedly frank about their motives. Alexander Stephens, the Confederacy's vice president, proclaimed that the new Southern nation's "foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical and moral truth." The slave-owning states that formed the breakaway republic issued official declarations echoing Stephens' theme. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization," was Mississippi's pronouncement. Texas affirmed that "the servitude of the African race, as existing in these states, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations". Georgia observed that "the abolitionists and their allies in the Northern States have been engaged in constant efforts to subvert our institutions and to excite insurrections and servile war among us," and that with Lincoln's election, "some of these efforts have received the public sanction of a majority of the leading men of the Republican party in the national councils, the same men who are now proposed as our rulers." South Carolina expressed concern that "the non-slaveholding states have assumed the right of deciding on the propriety of our domestic institutions . . . [and] have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery."

The new Confederate nation modeled its constitution after the United States Constitution, with an important addition. Article I, Section 9, Paragraph 4, provided that "No bill of attainder,



▲ **Captain James David Rhea**, the author's great-grandfather—company commander, escapee, dedicated Confederate.



▲ **Alexander Stephens** (1812-1883). Like other secessionist leaders (before and during the war), Stephens made no bones about the nature and purpose of the Confederacy—it was a nation founded upon the idea that the white race was superior to the black, and that therefore the former should rule. It was dedicated, to use an odious modern phrase, to "white supremacy."

► “Man may err,” said Southern theologian **James Henry Thornwell** (1811-1862), “but God can never lie.” And God, according to legions of Southern preachers, had sanctified slavery.

ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed.” And Article IV, Section 3, Paragraph 3, stated that “The Confederate States may acquire new territory . . . In all such territory, the institution of negro slavery, as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected by Congress and the territorial government.”

While public figures in the border slave-owning states such as Tennessee and Virginia articulated conflicting views about slavery and secession, opinion-makers in the Deep South—preachers, politicians, and the landed gentry—spewed forth a uniform stream of proslavery propaganda. More than 4 million enslaved human beings lived in the South in 1860, and the institution touched every aspect of the region’s social, political, and economic life. During the decades preceding secession, political battles raged over the admission of new states as slave or free, abolitionists demanded the immediate end of slavery, and Northern politicians waxed shrill about the immorality of human bondage. Seeing the tide of history turning against them, Southerners went on the offensive. Their “peculiar institution” morphed from a “necessary evil” to a “positive good,” a “practical and moral necessity,” and the “will of Almighty God.”

As Northern criticism of slavery intensified, the three major protestant churches split into sectional factions, leaving Southern preachers to talk to Southern audiences without contradiction. Messages from the pulpit and from a growing religious press accentuated an extreme, uncompromising, ideological atmosphere.

What were the arguments? Reverend Furman of South Carolina insisted that the Holy Scriptures sanctioned slavery and warned that if Lincoln were elected, “every Negro in South Carolina and every other Southern state will be his own master; nay, more than that, will be the equal of every one of you. If you are tame enough to submit, abolition preachers will be at hand to consummate the marriage of your daughters to black husbands.” A fellow reverend from Virginia agreed that



on no other subject “are [the Bible’s] instructions more explicit, or their salutary tendency and influence more thoroughly tested and corroborated by experience than on the subject of slavery.” The Methodist Episcopal Church asserted that slavery “has received the sanction of

Jehova.” As a South Carolina Presbyterian concluded: “If the scriptures do not justify slavery, I know not what they do justify.”

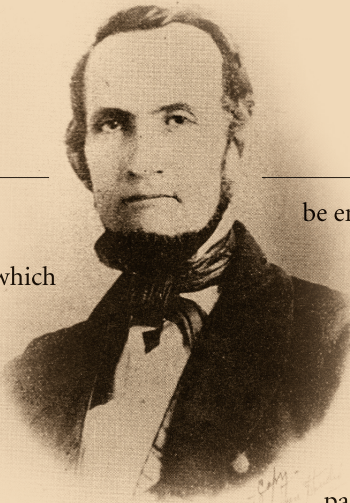
A South Carolina pastor summed up the case. “Thus, God, as he is infinitely wise, just and holy, never could authorize the practice of a moral evil,” he explained. “But God has authorized the practice of slavery, not only by the bare permission of his Providence, but the express provision of his word. Therefore, slavery is not a moral evil.” Since the Bible was the source for moral authority, the case was closed. “Man may err,” said the Southern theologian James Henley Thornwell, “but God can never lie.”

It was a corollary that to attack slavery was to attack the Bible. The *Southern Presbyterian* divined a “religious character to the present struggle. Anti-slavery is essentially infidel. It wars upon the Bible, on the Church of Christ, on the truth of God, on the souls of men.” A Georgia preacher denounced abolitionists as “diametrically opposed to the letter and spirit of the Bible, and as subversive of all sound morality, as the worst ravings of infidelity.” The theologian Thornwell minced no words. “The parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders,” he reminded his readers. “They are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake.”

By 1860, Southern churches were openly urging secession. “We cannot coalesce with men whose society will eventually corrupt our own, and bring down upon us the awful doom which awaits them,” a South Carolina preacher proclaimed. Shortly after Lincoln’s election, Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer



▲ **William L. Harris**, one of the Mississippi Secession Commissioners to Georgia, put the situation plainly to his listeners: “Mississippi is convinced that there is but one alternative: This new union with Lincoln Black republicans and free negroes, without slavery; or, slavery under our old constitutional bond of union, without Lincoln Black Republicans or free negroes either, to molest us. “If we take the former, then submission to negro equality is our fate. If the latter, then secession is inevitable . . .”



stressed that slavery was now the central question in the national crisis. Slavery defined the South, which had a “providential trust to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of slavery as now existing.” Slavery, he continued, “has fashioned our modes of life, and determined all of our habits of thought and feeling, and molded the very type of our civilization.” Since abolition was “undeniably atheistic,” it was up to the South to defend “the cause of God and religion.” Nothing, he concluded, “is now left but secession.”

The Deep South’s politicians sang from the same hymnal as did its preachers. In late 1860 and early 1861, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana appointed commissioners to persuade their sister slave states to secede. Their speeches and letters—collected for us in Charles Dew’s *Apostles of Disunion*—make revealing reading.

Mississippi’s commissioner to Georgia contended that Lincoln’s Republicans “now demand equality between the white and negro races, under our constitution; equality in representation, equality in right of suffrage, equality in the honors and emoluments of office, equality in the social circle, equality in the rights of matrimony.” He reminded Georgians that “Our fathers made this a government for the white man, rejecting the negro as an ignorant, inferior, barbarian race, incapable of self-government, and not, therefore, entitled to be associated with the white man upon terms of civil, political, or social equality.” Lincoln and his followers aimed to “overturn and strike down this great feature of our union and to substitute in its stead their new theory of the universal equality of the black and white races.” The choice was stark. Mississippi would “rather see the last of her race, men, women, and children, immolated in one common funeral pyre than see them subjugated to the degradation of civil, political and social equality with the negro race.”

Elaborating this theme, Mississippi’s commissioner to Maryland warned that “the moment that slavery is pronounced a moral evil—a sin—by the general government, that moment the safety of the rights of the South will

be entirely gone.” Commissioners to North Carolina cautioned that Lincoln’s election meant “utter ruin and degradation” for the South. “The white children now born will be compelled to flee from the land of their birth, and from the slaves their parents have toiled to acquire as an inheritance for them, or to submit to the degradation of being reduced to an equality with them, and all its attendant horrors.”

Former South Carolina Congressman John McQueen closed his address to Richmond’s civic leaders by inviting them to join the “Southern Confederacy, where white men shall rule our destinies, and from which we may transmit to our posterity the rights, privileges, and honor left us by our ancestors.”

An Alabama commissioner to Kentucky considered Lincoln’s election “nothing less than an open declaration of war, for the triumph of this new theory of government destroys the property of the south, lays waste her fields, and inaugurates all the horrors of a San Domingo servile insurrection, consigning her citizens to assassinations and her wives and daughters to pollution and violation to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans.” The slave holder and the non-slaveholder, he predicted, “must ultimately share the same fate; all be degraded to a position of equality with free negroes, stand side by side with them at the polls, and fraternize in all the social relations of life, or else there will be an eternal war of races, desolating the land with blood, and utterly wasting all the resources of the country.” Secession was the only means by which the “heaven ordained superiority of the white over the black race” could be sustained. The abolition of slavery would either “plunge the South into a race war or so stain the blood of the white race that it would be contaminated for all time.” Could Southern men “submit to such degradation and ruin,” he asked, and answered his own question, “God forbid that they should.” Another of Alabama’s commissioners predicted that “the subjugation of the south to an abolition dynasty would result in a saturnalia of blood,” and that emancipation meant “the abhorrent degradation of social and political equality, the probability

◀ **Stephen Fowler Hale** (1816-1862), an Alabama Secession Commissioner to Kentucky, argued that “Lincoln’s minions” had one clear goal—“the extinction of slavery.” Hale therefore called for “separate state secession” now, “Confederation afterwards.” His message fell in large part on deaf ears, and Kentucky remained in the Union. Hale dies heroically leading his men at Gaines Mill.



▲ Four days after Lincoln’s election, Presbyterian preacher **Benjamin Morgan Palmer** (1818-1902) delivered a sermon in New Orleans that was reproduced in newspapers across the South and in pamphlet form. Labelling the abolitionists “atheists,” he claimed that in the coming struggle the South was called upon “to defend the cause of God and religion.”

▼ **Henry L. Benning** (1814-1875), Georgia secession Commissioner to Virginia, favored a "consolidated" Southern republic with strong centralized government, consisting of the Deep South states only, so that slavery would be controlled by "those most interested."

of a war of extermination between the races or the necessity of flying the country to avoid the association."

Typical also was the message Georgia's Henry Benning—later one of General Lee's talented brigade commanders—to the Virginia legislature. "If things are allowed to go on as they are, it is certain that slavery is to be abolished," he predicted. "By the time the north shall have attained the power, the black race will be in a large majority, and then we will have black governors, black legislatures, black juries, black everything." Benning's prediction was dire. "War will break out everywhere like hidden fire from the earth. We will be overpowered and our men will be compelled to wander like vagabonds all over the earth, and as for our women, the horrors of their state we cannot contemplate in imagination." Reaching accord with the North, he warned, was impossible. "They will hate you and your institutions as much as they do now, and treat you accordingly. Suppose they elevate Charles Sumner to the presidency? Suppose they elevate Frederick Douglas, your escaped slave, to the presidency? What would be your position in such an event? I say give me pestilence and famine sooner than that."

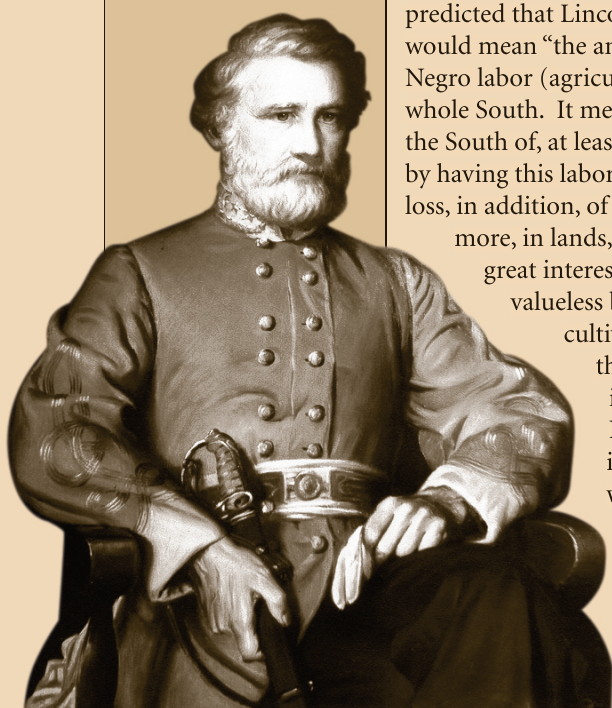
Southerners heard identical messages from their community leaders. In the fall of 1860, John Townsend, a South Carolina planter, predicted that Lincoln's elevation to presidency would mean "the annihilation and end of all Negro labor (agricultural especially) over the whole South. It means a loss to the planters of the South of, at least, FOUR BILLION dollars, by having this labor taken from them; and a loss, in addition, of FIVE BILLION dollars more, in lands, mills, machinery, and other great interests, which will be rendered valueless by the want of slave labor to cultivate the lands, and the loss of the crops which give to those interests life and prosperity." Non-slaveholders were also in danger. "The color of the white man is now, in the South, a title of nobility in his relations as to the negro," he reminded his readers. "He may be poor, it is true; but there is no point upon which he is

so justly proud and sensitive as his privilege of caste; and there is nothing which he would resent with more fierce indignation than the attempt of the Abolitionist to emancipate the slaves and elevate the Negroes to an equality with himself and his family."

There you have it: the reasons that our ancestors gave their fellow Southerners for Secession. Foremost was the need to preserve slavery. Why should non-slaveholders care? Because slavery was the will of God, and those who opposed the institution—the abolitionists—were by definition anti-God. More to the point, secession was necessary to maintain white supremacy, avoid a race war, and prevent racial amalgamation. For Southerners to remain in the Union meant risking their property, their social standing, and the "sacred purity of our daughters." Tariffs appear nowhere in these sermons and speeches, and "states' rights" are mentioned only in the context of the rights of states to decide whether some of their inhabitants could own other humans.

The Confederacy's spirit persisted long after its armies had disbanded. The sad history of Jim Crow and the government-sanctioned rein of terror and second-class citizenship inflicted on former slaves and their descendants should be a matter of shame for all Southerners. I came of age in the segregated South of the 1950's and witnessed that heritage first-hand. I will never forget it. The Confederate battle flag of my youth represented opposition to integration; it waved defiantly as Governor Wallace proclaimed, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" The flag dominated outdoor Ku Klux Klan rallies in a nearby town and flew over Whites protesting the sharing of water fountains, bathrooms, schools, and bus seats with citizens of color. Modern Confederate apologists protest that hate groups have hijacked their flag. But White Supremacists did not appropriate the Confederate flag by accident; they were not drawn to it simply by its colors and design. They embraced it because it represented a nation stridently and openly dedicated to their principles.

For too long, organizations claiming to speak for our Southern ancestors have promoted fantastical versions of history. To this day, the Sons of Confederate Veterans website announces that "the preservation of liberty



“Louisiana looks to the formation of a Southern confederacy to preserve the blessings of African slavery . . . The people of Louisiana would consider it a most fatal blow to African slavery if Texas either did not secede or having seceded should not join her destinies to theirs in a Southern Confederacy.” —George Williamson, Louisiana Secession Commissioner to Texas.

and freedom was the motivating factor in the South’s decision to fight the Second American Revolution,” conveniently neglecting to mention that the right at stake was the liberty and freedom of White people to own Black people. The site also highlights Stephen D. Lee’s charge to the Sons of Confederate Veterans to vindicate “the cause for which we fought,” but fails to remind us that that the glorious cause involved state-enforced bondage for some four million people. We hear that Confederate symbols represent heritage, not hate. But how can we in good conscience celebrate a heritage whose self-avowed reason for existence was the exploitation and debasement of a sizeable segment of its population?

Our ancestors were unapologetic about why they wanted to secede; it is up to us to take them at their word and to dispassionately form our own judgments about their actions. This is a discussion we Southerners need to have. The

Sesquicentennial affords us an opportunity to insist on a fact-based dialogue about the wellsprings of secession, a dialogue based on what the participants said at the time, not what they and their apologists said later to justify their actions to posterity. We are a diverse people with a wide array of opinions. I am very happy that the Confederacy lost the Civil War, and I believe that the Confederacy’s stated goals and ideology should offend the sensibility of anyone living in our times. We ought to be able to look history squarely in the face and call it for what it was. Only by discarding the myths of the past can we move forward to an honest future.

Gordon C. Rhea has written six award-winning books and numerous articles on the Overland Campaign of 1864. He is a frequent lecturer throughout the country on Civil War topics and has appeared on Cable TV’s History, A&E, and discovery networks.

▼ *Members of the Ku Klux Klan flaunt the Confederate battle flag during a Klan rally. Modern white supremacists do not make use of the battle flag by chance. They do so because the Confederacy, as Vice President Alexander Stephens and the secession commissioners made explicit, was created in order to extend white supremacy into the future.*

