I rebel, wrote Camus, therefore we exist. American history through the end of Reconstruction was the history of a gathering, successful, imperiled, then once more apparently-triumphant revolution: a revolution, to be sure, blessed with geographical isolation and frontier land for the taking, but a revolution nonetheless. Both Jefferson and Lincoln matter-of-factly justified violent revolution as the obvious recourse for a people whose constitutional expedients had run out. We were a revolutionary nation till 1877 as we have not been since.

A generation ago Charles Beard suggested that the American Civil War was the "second American Revolution," indeed in a strict sense the first American revolution. In many ways, as Beard pointed out, the war of 1861-1865 was more like a revolution than the war of 1776-1783. Property was confiscated on a much more extensive scale, notably $2,000,000,000 worth of slaves. When in his Second Inaugural Lincoln said that if necessary the war should continue until every drop of blood drawn by the lash had been paid for by a drop drawn by the sword, he spoke more wisely than he knew: for the number of men on both sides who died in the Civil War was approximately equal to the number of slaves in the United States in 1776.

Radical Republicans in Congress were well aware that they were living through a revolution. They did not need the young French reporter Georges Clemenceau (from whom Beard borrowed the idea) to tell them that this was an upheaval comparable to 1640 in England or 1789 in France. In 1867 Senator Howard of Michigan defended the policy of military reconstruction against the charge that it would recreate Cromwell's "oppressive and tyrannical" major generals. The history of Cromwell's rule, Howard insisted, had been written by men hostile to the revolution. In fact England was bubbling with counter-revolution and the task of any responsible government was to crush such conspiracy. The major generals had been justified, because the 1650's like the 1860's were a "time of war, of civil war, of conspiracy, of public danger."

Far more common, as the popular tags "Jacobin" and "Bourbon" attest, was an analogy to revolutionary France.
The most radical Congressional debate in American history took place in the spring of 1862 on the question of confiscating land owned by Rebels. In response to the accusation that Robespierre’s confiscations were “not precedents to be followed, but warnings to be heeded,” Howard and other Radicals invoked Old Testament exemplars. Representative Cutler reminded the House that when 250 princes of Israel rebelled against Moses and Aaron, the latter put the problem in the hands of the Lord. “Did he argue the right of coercion with them? . . . No, sir; he sent them quickly down to hell, and passed a general confiscation act.” Senator Charles Sumner, later to use the story of Naboth’s vineyard in protesting Grant’s plan to annex Santo Domingo, used it in 1862 to justify confiscation. Sumner conceded that French confiscation “aroused at the time the eloquent indignation of Burke, and still causes a sigh among all who think less of principles than of privileges.” But:

Cruel as were many of the consequences, this confiscation must be judged as a part of that mighty revolution whose temper it shared; nor will it be easy to condemn anything but its excesses, unless you are ready to say that the safety of France, torn by domestic foes and invaded abroad, was not worth securing, or that equality before the law, which is now the most assured possession of that great nation, was not worth obtaining.

Grant, then, that Civil War was revolution. Yet at the core of the permanent revolution culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation a curious enigma appears. At first glance it appears to have been a revolution without revolutionaries. If the Civil War was a revolution comparable to those of Cromwell and Robespierre, if slavery (contrary to Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin and other consensus historians) was America’s feudalism, why didn’t the slaves rebel? If the compromise of 1877 was a counter-revolution, why was it so easy? If the abolitionists were a revolutionary vanguard, why did their hundreds of thousands of articles and lectures proceed so meager an ideology of dissent?

Stanley Elkins’ Slavery was much more than an answer to the first of these questions (why didn’t the slaves rebel?). As Don E. Fehrenbacher has observed, a close link exists between a given interpretation of the genesis of Civil War and a
corresponding view of Reconstruction. Thus when Elkins argues that slave insurrections failed to materialize because American slavery was a social system uniquely psychologically disabling for its inmates, that observation also suggests an answer to the question, Why was the compromise of 1877 so little resisted? Elkins himself hints as much, saying: “That the Negro lacked the capacity to care for himself as a free American was a conviction that slavery’s strongest opponents, not excluding Thomas Jefferson, could seldom escape”; and again: “It was, and is, perfectly possible to accept both the descriptive accuracy of what the Southerner saw [the Negro as Sambo] and the attainability, in theory, of what the Northerner hoped for.” If childlike Samboism was not merely the mask of the oppressed but the real psychology of the ante-bellum Southern Negro, one could not of course expect post-bellum Southern Negroes to be Toussaint L’Ouvertures. That is, if slavery unfitted the slave to fight for freedom on his own behalf, it unfitted him also to use his freedom responsibly once it came.

This is the traditional Southern view. Equally traditional, although garbed in the vocabulary of modern social psychology, is Elkins’ view of the abolitionists. A revolution made on behalf of—rather than in support of—the suffering slave is in Elkins’ eyes a contrived and artificial, in the last analysis a needless revolution. Against the backdrop of his analysis of slavery, the abolitionists stand forth as men more concerned with their own psychic needs than with the ostensible object of their sympathy. Lacking the firm institutional grasp of the Founding Fathers (who Elkins believes produced “our best social thought”); the abolitionists created a dialogue so moralistic and so rigidly dichotomous that politicians could only blunder toward the brink of civil war.

Elkins’ psychologism builds here on the materialism of Beard. In contrast to Marx, who eulogized Wendell Phillips, Beard espoused an essentially Southern view of the irrepres-sible conflict, which discounted the importance of slavery and saw the South as an “agrarian” society at the mercy of aggressive Northern capitalism. For both Beard and Turner, abolitionism was an annoying and temporary diversion of
American radicalism from its manifest destiny of fighting wage slavery in the North.

A generation later, sensitized by the nascent civil rights movement, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. uneasily sought to show that Jacksonians, while hostile to abolitionism in the 1830’s, had come down on the right side at Armageddon in ’61. Elkins’ critique cuts deeper. For him there can be no clearly right side after Sumter since Sumter was unnecessary, and the vitally central course—a strategy of gradual emancipation making use of existing institutional means—had been buried under abolitionist polemics decades before.

I think Elkins essentially mistaken in his explicit analyses of slavery and abolitionism, and in his implicit analysis of Reconstruction. Consider first abolitionism. Elkins argues that Americans concerned to end slavery should have imitated the successful British movement in undermining the peculiar institution by piecemeal reforms. This argument fails on three heads. First, British West Indian slavery was declining economically before emancipation in 1833: it had no frontier and yielded smaller and smaller profits on a fixed supply of decreasingly fertile land. In contrast, American slavery on the eve of Civil War—as Conrad and Meyer showed in a famous article now reprinted¹—was a flourishing economic proposition. The price of slaves rose in the 1850’s because of strong demand from new Southwestern plantations, and the Southeastern economy also continued in the black (in both senses) by breeding slaves for the frontier market. The crisis of ante-bellum slavery was political, not economic.

Secondly, the British abolitionist movement which Elkins retrospectively recommends to “poor Garrison” and his comrades operated in an altogether different institutional context, a consideration Elkins more than anyone might have been expected to appreciate. Slavery in Great Britain, never more than a matter of West Indian planters travelling with slave domestics, was abolished by the Somerset decision in 1772. Therefore, Parliament in 1833 was legislating for virtually unrepresented colonies, and had little domestic oppo-

sition and no built-in constitutional inhibitions to overcome. In the United States, on the other hand, the pragmatic Founding Fathers whom Elkins admires had so safeguarded slavery in the United States Constitution that the most institutionally-minded American abolitionist could find legal authority only to abolish the slave trade, to regulate slavery in the District of Columbia, and to prevent slavery expansion: all of which they did. None of these measures reached the massive central fact of Southern slavery itself. Moreover, after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 permitted public officials to deputize any citizen for slave-catching posses and the Supreme Court in 1857 decided that the Negro had no rights which the white man need respect, the Northerner wishing to give pragmatic succor to the fugitive at his door was obliged to go outside proper procedures and to commit civil disobedience.

Finally, the British analogy breaks down completely when confronted with the circumstance that English abolitionists, notwithstanding the institutional aides their setting made available, abandoned gradualism in despair when West Indian legislatures refused to carry out the piecemeal reforms which Parliament enacted. Only after turning to the doctrine of immediate emancipation which Elkins condemns in Garrison could the British abolitionists whom he applauds achieve their objective.

American abolitionists, then, broke the law, vituperated their antagonists, and concentrated their effort outside Congress, not because they lacked the "stake in society" which the Founding Fathers enjoyed, but because the Fathers bequeathed them an almost insuperable institutional dilemma. For Elkins to say that the abolitionists should have used "concrete" political means as the Fathers did, when the Fathers—through the three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave clause, and the clause envisioning Federal suppression of insurrections—had done their best to write a Constitution making those

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2Traditionally, the Fathers' inaction toward slavery has been excused on the ground that they believed it was declining and would soon come to a natural end. This view is strongly attacked, in my opinion justifiably, in Robert McCollley's Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964.
means unavailable, is like tying one hand behind a person's back and then asking him why he doesn't fight like a man.

Awareness of the enormous obstacles besetting anyone who sought to end slavery in nineteenth century America is the common ground of the contributors to The Antislavery Vanguard: News Essays on the Abolitionists, edited by Martin Duberman. Recognizing the impact of the civil rights struggle on these essays, editor Duberman nevertheless asserts:

An historian's deep engagement in contemporary affairs is not presumptive proof that his historical interpretations will be distorted. His involvement may, on the contrary, allow him to share, and thereby understand more fully, the comparable commitment of an earlier generation. He may see aspects of their experience previously closed off to historians who lacked the needed points of identification.

Howard Zinn's closing essay on "Abolitionists, Freedom-Riders, and the Tactics of Agitation" accordingly applies insights gleaned from the last decade to the earlier movement. "Extremism," Zinn argues, is a word often hurled unjustifiably at a proposal which is extreme "only in a context of limited alternatives." Again, if "emotionalism" is understood to mean the creation of a state of excitement and an intensified awareness, it can be defended as focusing and liberating reason, not destroying it. In discussing the abolitionists' unwillingness to compromise, Zinn joins issue with Elkins directly. He says: "Only the hypothesis of common interest for the entire population can justify an appeal to the opponent on the basis of reason." And he asks the historian to recognize a "necessary division of labor" between the politician like Lincoln who moves in response to public opinion, and radicals like Wendell Phillips who change it. Here Zinn makes contact with Richard Hofstadter's defense of Phillips in The American Political Tradition, a book which introduced the concept of consensus more to condemn than to praise it. One suspects that for some time to come the judgement of historians on abolitionism will be closer to Zinn than to Elkins.

Elkins' discussion of abolitionism, however, has always been considered the weakest portion of his Slavery. Much

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more substantial and valuable is the consideration of slave psychology and the prolonged analogy with the German concentration camp. But here one must say that in his analogizing, fruitful for the whole of American historiography as it has been, Elkins leaps over certain obvious geographic and demographic realities. Contrasting North American slavery with that of Latin America he finds the former peculiarly crippling to the psychology of its victims because capitalism lacked in colonies settled by Englishmen the institutional obstacles which a centralized Church and a sophisticated legal tradition presented to it in the Iberian colonies. Hence the slave in North America, decultured and soul-washed, encountering no "significant others" than the profit-minded master who doubled as local judge and hired the local clergyman, failed to revolt.

But what about the British West Indies? Their culture was English not Iberian, yet their slaves—notably in Jamaica, but in the smaller British islands too—repeatedly did revolt. Surely they did so when their American brethren (relatively speaking) did not because: (a) the West Indies are islands, and having no sanctuary north of the Potomac toward which to flee, the Frederick Douglasses of Jamaica stood and fought; (b) in the United States the slave was outnumbered more than five to one, while in the West Indies the demographic odds ran on the order of ten to one in his favor. When the outbreak of Civil War altered the objective circumstances so as to facilitate flight, fugitives from the plantations multiplied enormously. "We wish to our hearts that the Yankees would whip," stated a Virginia slave impressed to man a Confederate battery at Bull Run, "and we would have run over to their side but our officers would have shot us if we had made the attempt." When he returned to the plantation after the battle, "there were officers prowling round the neighborhood in search of all the negroes, but we dodged round so smartly, they didn't catch us." Ultimately, John Parker made his way to the Union lines.⁴

How many Sambos were John Parkers waiting to throw off the mask of docility and flee, seems to me impossible to determine. Once again the essential relevance of Reconstruction to the ante-bellum story becomes clear. For surely the best test of Elkins' proposition that Samboism had sunk to the core of the slave's psyche is, How did the slave behave when he was freed?

The consensus approach to Reconstruction is best exemplified in *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, by Elkins' close associate Eric McKitrick. Ostensibly a critical revision of the over-generous portrait of Andrew Johnson created by such scholars as Beard and Howard Beale, McKitrick's stance toward Reconstruction represents also a return to the attitude of James Ford Rhodes: Johnson's lenient policy was better than Stevens-Sumner harshness, but Johnson erred in carrying it out. It is, writes McKitrick, "rather hard to avoid the conclusion that of the two policies it was Johnson's which contained the greatest long-range wisdom and which best seemed to serve the interests of the country at large." McKitrick follows Rhodes in believing that the most enlightened Northern statesman was Massachusetts governor and capitalist John M. Andrew, and that could Andrew have settled matters with his Southern counterparts, men of power and "natural leaders" like Confederate general Wade Hampton, a better way forward could have been found. One sees clearly in this imaginary scenario the counterpart in the historiography of Reconstruction to Elkins' belief that the problem of slavery could have been settled by "men with specific stakes in society, men attached to institutions and with a vested interest in one another's presence," like the Founding Fathers. Explicit in both *Slavery* and *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* is the inarticulate major premise of the consensus school generally, that power in society properly belongs to the businessmen who already have it.

McKitrick's book was published in 1960, the year of the sit-ins; subsequent treatments, reflecting the Southern student movement and its demand for Federal intervention, have tended to argue that the Radical Republicans were right. Whereas McKitrick accepted Andrew's conviction that the men who led the Confederacy would inevitably dominate the post-
war South, John Hope Franklin ended his *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (1961) with lament that the South returned to the Union “with a leadership strikingly like that of the South which had seceded in 1860.” Britisher W. R. Brock’s *An American Crisis* (1963), an intensive study of the formation of Congressional policy for the South from 1865 to 1867, leaned toward the conclusion that Sumner and Stevens were realistic in suggesting that the Southern states be governed as territories during a prolonged period of social transformation. Their policy failed, Brock implied, because it was not applied long enough: “though one may blame them for their determination to have a revolution it is a little unfair to blame them for being forced to stop half-way.” When in 1965 Kenneth Stampp too ventured on the dark and bloody ground of Reconstruction, the circle of slavery-and-Reconstruction historiography was closed: for Stampp, whose book on *The Peculiar Institution* championed the thesis that the slave was a white man with a black skin who consciously resented and resisted his oppression, now took issue also with the Elkins-McKitrick version of Reconstruction. McKitrick’s endorsement of Wade Hampton’s “road not taken” involved the conception that paternalistic white leaders, had they been permitted to rule, might have made the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments unnecessary (just as Elkins argued that had responsible men of affairs, rather than abolitionists, been in charge, Civil War could have been avoided). But Stampp concludes:

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which could have been adopted only under the conditions of radical reconstruction, make the blunders of that era, tragic though they were, dwindle into insignificance. For if it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights.

Thus historians of Reconstruction differ as to whether the Federal government was too much coercive or too little in its approach to the post-bellum South. Each position presupposes a set of assumptions about the strategy of social

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change. One of the virtues of Howard Zinn's *The Southern Mystique* is that, in attempting to articulate the rationale for a coercive approach to the new reconstruction of the South, he makes it possible for historians of the old reconstruction to re-phrase their disagreement with more clarity. In asking the Federal government to manipulate the white Southerner's environment so as to induce him to act decently toward the Negro, Zinn argues as Radical Republicans argued in 1867. Similarly, Southerners Claude Sitton and C. Vann Woodward, in charging Zinn with quasi-totalitarianism and insensitivity to the need for change to be organic and spontaneous if it is to be lasting, express much the same apprehension voiced in the 1870's by Liberal Republicans and Southern moderates against (as it seemed to them) bayonet rule ad infinitum.

The persistence of this cleavage, separating Northern radical from Southern liberal by a line thin but hard, must dampen optimism. Each body of assumptions is self-consistent and convincing. Yet the two arguments and their respective exponents are somehow opaque to one another; and so after a century of tragedy the nation blunders on, trying first one nostrum, then the other, invoking now this rationale and now that, but never confident and certain of its course.

I think there is a third strategy. I think that Reconstruction failed after the Civil War, not because the North tried to compel social change at bayonet point, not because the North should have kept troops in the South longer, but because political change was not reinforced by economic change. The freedman was given the vote but he was not given the land. Had the plantations of leading Confederates been divided among the former slaves, the Southern Negro would have had at least the beginnings of economic independence to support his new political power. In fact Negro suffrage was supported only by bayonets, and Negroes ceased to vote independently when troops were withdrawn. The mistake of Congress, in this view, was to set up a stool with two legs—Negro suffrage and a Federal presence—which needed the third leg of economic revolution in order to stand by itself.
Such a "third course" was advocated at the time by Thaddeus Stevens, who was reluctant to enact Negro suffrage until the plantations of leading Rebels were divided. Among historians W. E. B. DuBois has concurred most clearly. Writing in 1901, at a time when historians and the public at large were convinced that the error in Reconstruction was (as the Atlantic Monthly put it) "giving the negro the ballot before he was qualified to use it," DuBois argued subtly that, to begin with, the freedman required the ballot to defend his new liberty, but also that to give him only the ballot and not the land was to end "a civil war by beginning a race feud." "A far better policy" would have included "a permanent Freedman's Bureau, with a national system of Negro schools; a carefully supervised employment and labor office; a system of impartial protection before the regular courts; and such institutions for social betterment as savings-banks, land and building associations, and social settlements." Unwilling to contemplate so vast a plan of social engineering, the nation came to regard "Negro suffrage as a final answer to all present perplexities": "The Freedman's Bureau died, and its child was the Fifteenth Amendment."

To be sure, DuBois' solution is modified Zinnism. But the important difference between Zinn's strategy (or his strategy as understood by his critics) and the strategy of DuBois is that in the former the emphasis falls on Federal protection, while the latter stresses a change in the economic substratum of daily life so that Negroes will have power to fight their own battles. The two approaches are complementary. However, there is a danger in 1965 as in 1865 of making protection, or protection plus the ballot, the core of one's program for the South, because this strategy suggests an endless vista of Federal officers hurrying from crisis spot to crisis spot of an unchanged and stubbornly resentful region. To break up the plantations in 1865, a step more radical than those actually taken, might have more quickly liberated black and white (for Stevens favored land for the poor whites, too) to find a new relationship by themselves. To have been more radical in this sense would have been being cruel in order to be kind.

The much-patronised abolitionists were far more aware of
the need for such undergirding economic change than Elkins and historians generally have supposed. Stevens was not alone. Pulitzer-prize winning Willie Lee Rose shows how stubbornly the ex-slaves and their abolitionist allies fought for land ownership in the sea island "rehearsal for reconstruction"; while James McPherson, in his splendid study of abolitionist agitation during and after the war, demonstrates that the vision of forty acres and a mule as a keystone of reconstruction was widespread, even commonplace, in the abolitionist press. Nothing that actually happened induced a Wendell Phillips or a Frederick Douglass to change their minds. Reviewing the failure of Reconstruction in the North American Review, Phillips stated: "Planted on his own land, sure of bread—instead of being merely a wages-slave—the negro's suffrage would have been a very different experiment." And Douglass declared in 1880 that had Stevens' strategy been followed, "the negro would not today be on his knees, as he is, supplicating the old master class to give him leave to toil."

In a pocket history of the United States distributed to American servicemen overseas during World War II, two deans of the historical profession (Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager) said that the Reconstruction state legislatures "were probably the worst that have ever been known in any English-speaking land." That was yesterday's history. Tomorrow's history will be along the lines laid down by McPherson, when he writes: "The South was not 'reconstructed' economically, and consequently the other measures of reconstruction rested upon an unstable foundation."

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