

# Sequence and strategy in the secession of the American South

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**Abstract** Secession and the civil war that followed are often regarded as having exclusively structural determinants, expressed in political cleavages. From this point of view, these events are explained, variously, by the rise of abolitionism in the North or sectionalism in the Union or some cultural attribute of the South. This focus gets us part of the way in understanding the events that led to secession, the creation of a Southern Confederacy, and civil war, but this interpretation says too little about precisely how these events and processes played out. Secession occurred in time, sequentially and dynamically, with one state leading and other states following. This article offers a processual specification of the conditions of Southern secession and the creation of a Southern Confederacy. It does so by focusing on mobilization within the vanguard state, South Carolina, and the consequences of this activity for other Southern states.

## Introduction

The American Civil War remains one of the most studied moments in American political development. From a comparative perspective, the Civil War can be regarded from multiple points of view: as a case of secession (e.g., Anderson 2004; Meadwell 1999), as a war (e.g., Stedman 1994), as a decisive episode in the international abolition of slavery (e.g., Drescher 1999; Blackburn 1988), or as a phase in a process of democratic transition and consolidation (e.g., Moore 1966). Each of these perspectives situates the Civil War in a larger class of phenomena.

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These classes are independent. Not all wars are secessions; not all seceding societies are slaveholding; not all slaveholding societies abolish slavery via secession or war; not all democratic transitions involve war or secession. Yet the American Civil War was in some ways all of these.

In this article, we recognize the idiosyncratic combination of qualities of this case without, however, implying any commitment to a strong thesis of American exceptionalism (on American exceptionalism, see Molho and Wood 1998; Gläser and Wellenreuther 2002; Katznelson and Shefter 2002; Lipset 1995). The purpose is to develop an analysis that focuses on general patterns of political mobilization and political process, whether the subject is secession, war, slaveholding societies, revolutions, or rebellions. The focus here is radical political mobilization in the antebellum South. Specifically, this paper offers a processual specification of existing explanations of South Carolina's role in achieving secession and creating a Southern Confederacy. That South Carolina took the lead was necessary, not incidental, to the creation of the Southern Confederacy. We focus on South Carolina and the mobilizing activity within the state because it seems that without its leadership, secession and the creation of the Confederacy would not have occurred at all.

### **The problem of radical political mobilization in the antebellum South**

Secession was a dynamic process that occurred in time. Any explanation of the secession of the South must take this feature into account. This is the puzzle addressed in this article: *Why did secessionist collective action take this form-sequenced over time – and why was it one state in particular – South Carolina – that initiated the process of secession?* This puzzle prompts a corollary question: *How did radical secessionists in South Carolina pursue a political agenda aimed at disunion?*

The secession of Southern states was made possible because of strategic choices made by radical secessionists, especially within the initial seceding state of South Carolina. The cornerstone of this strategy was “sequential exit” whereby the most radical of the Southern states initiated secession and forced the hand of less radical actors. After secession was accomplished in these states and a new confederacy established, this new government orchestrated a conflict with the federal government that precipitated secession among previously moderate states of the Upper South.

Our arguments take into account the net effects of the institutional context of the emerging American political system: that combination of constitutional and organizational features that encouraged mobilization along secessionist lines and that, in other ways, made secessionist collective action more problematic. The relatively loose organization of states in a federal union made secession a focal point for political agitation and helped to make plausible the claim of a right to secede. Moreover, the national government enjoyed a comparative advantage in the use of legitimate force, but not a strict monopoly. States retained the right to form and equip militia.

At the same time, however, the arrangements of the states-union meant that a right to secede was vested in various states, and that the secession of the South had to be coordinated across these political boundaries. The American states-union facilitated, yet complicated, secession in the following ways.

Secession across these units could have occurred in one of three ways. (1) Separate decisions to secede that occurred simultaneously. (2) A single decision for all units that was made collectively. (3) Sequential decisions in which there were early and late seceders. Each of these patterns has problems of commitment. (1) A tacit or explicit agreement to secede simultaneously can be violated. If all but one violates the agreement, the result is separate secession by a single state. (2) If no collective decision can be reached, single units have to contemplate whether they are willing to secede alone. Even if a collective decision can be made, it must be binding; otherwise units can renege on their assent to the collective decision. If not binding, the result can again be separate state secession. (3) If a unit will lead only if assured that its leadership will set off a chain reaction, that unit must have confidence in the assurances of others that they will follow. If that confidence is misplaced and that unit secedes, then the result is once again separate state secession. These are the ways in which the institutional context complicated the act(s) of secession.

We use this basic understanding of secession as a dynamic process in time, characterized by a particular pattern of sequential exit, to suggest that conventional interpretations of this case of secession are not fully specified. Our emphasis on sequence and process raises questions about any explanation that is rooted in variables that are distributed across multiple political jurisdictions. These are explanations that describe general conditions that contribute to secession. There is an explanatory gap, however, between general lines of cleavage dividing North and South and the actual pattern of sequential exit. Moreover, the “South” was not quite a natural entity; rather, it was a political construction.

The evidence we present suggests that the actions of other Southern states were not rooted completely in structure or culture, but were partially endogenous to the mobilizing activity of South Carolinian politicians. Wider mobilization in a politically-constructed white “South” was a means by which South Carolinian politicians pursued their interests. A part of the strategy of supporters of secession in South Carolina was to claim that the interests of the state and the interests of the South were identical. And if states in the putative South resisted this invitation to accept the leadership of South Carolina, military conflict with the federal government would force their hands.

Attention to the dynamics of radical leadership and mobilization provides a way to close the gap between structure and culture on the one hand and the pattern of sequential exit on the other, and to consider how the South was constructed. In the next section, we critically consider four kinds of explanations that draw in different ways on general conditions: sectional balance, the abolitionist movement, the economics of slavery, and the ethos of male honor in the South. We draw on the heuristics of counter-factual thought experiments (Tetlock and Belkin 1996; Bulhof 1999; Gaddis 2002) in probing the problem of explanation arising from the various paths that secession *could* have taken, given the existence of multiple political jurisdictions.

## General conditions and sequential exit

There is, for example, an explicit analytic narrative that bears on our arguments. Weingast's work on antebellum American politics emphasizes the violation of the sectional balance rule in the 1850s in explaining the breakdown of American institutions and secession (Weingast 1998). According to Weingast, failure to maintain this rule was the critical turning point in North–South relations. Without denying the importance of sectional balance in domestic politics, there is nothing in Weingast's analysis of sectional balance that provides purchase on the central feature of sequential exit and the leadership of South Carolina without which secession would not have occurred.

In contrast, a different narrative emphasizes the importance of the abolitionist movement (Carpenter 2000), particularly changes in the strategic orientations of central abolitionist activists and organizations. There is merit in an interpretation that sees secession and war as the result of a process of mobilization and counter-mobilization initiated by abolitionism. “The abolitionists were willing to endanger the Union in order to attack slavery and the plantation system; the secessionists were willing to destroy the Union in order to defend them” (Brown 1930 [1902]:98–99). From this point of view, “the secessionist movement in the Cotton States began as early as the abolitionist movement in New England” (Brown: 98). Yet this interpretation implies that secession and war were fated to occur from the first moment of abolitionist organization. In contrast, we do not see mobilization in the white South as strictly determined. This interpretation can tell us little about the specific path to outcomes, nor why secession took the pattern that it did.

Suppose that we were to give pride of place to either abolitionism or sectionalism, and thus chose starting points for our analysis consistent with either, such as the Missouri Compromise of 1820 or the emergence of organized abolition societies. There is nothing in either of these starting points that would predict the specific pattern of secession, led by one state and followed predictably, in our analysis, by others. *Any* pattern of leaders and followers is consistent with the general consequences of abolition and sectionalism. Indeed, simultaneous secession is as consistent with these effects as sequential secession, whoever leads and whoever follows in the latter. Florida could have gone first in 1860, or Alabama, or Louisiana, and little damage would be done to theoretical arguments that look either to abolition or sectionalism or to both.

To emphasize abolition or sectionalism as causes would be to imply that there was no issue of coordination. Yet this was precisely the problem of mobilization that radical secessionists had to solve, and recognized that they had to solve. Secession occurred because radical secessionists desired it and devised a strategy to accomplish it. Despite the reputations of some of the radical leaders, conveyed in descriptions of some of them as “ultras,” “hotspurs,” and “fire-eaters,” many of them thought strategically. When they finally were able to force the hand of the federal government and conditional Unionists in the South in late 1860 and early 1861, they were implementing a strategy that had been developed much earlier. Secession did not simply *happen* to them. Radical secessionists did not miscalculate nor were they converted to secession late in the endgame, after compromise had failed.

It is tempting to propose a solution to this dilemma by claiming that necessity would have been the mother of invention. In the absence of a radical vanguard in 1860, *some* state would have immediately emerged as leader, or *some* combination of states would have acted together, because too much was at stake not to act. The problem with this sort of claim, however, is that it rests on an inferior form of explanation. In effect, the claim is that leadership would have emerged because it was *needed*. Needs, however, are not always satisfied. Invoking a need says nothing at all about whether it is fulfilled. Nor does it say much about how needs are fulfilled, if they are.

However, let us therefore take this line of argument several steps further in order to appreciate fully the problem of explanation we have identified. Why did one state go first, and why was it this particular state when there was more than one path possible, given the distribution of slaveholding across several political jurisdictions? Why did secession occur when it did? Why, in short, was secession instantiated in the way that it was? In considering this set of problems in this way, then, we want to show that we are aware of the general methodological issue of constructing “just so” stories in historical narratives.

The leadership of South Carolina is of no theoretical or historical consequence if the pattern of events after the first secession was invariant across different descriptions of how secession occurred. If, say, Alabama had seceded first and everything afterward replicated what happened in history, then the leadership of South Carolina is of no significance. This is an argument about substitutes. It still begs the question of whether any other state(s) would have emerged to lead, if South Carolina had not. Historical differences, from this point of view, would have occurred only if *no state* seceded.

If history had unfolded as it did, no matter who led, we still would not have complete grounds to argue that secession was fully determined and that the secession of the “South” was certain. Such a conclusion depends on one of these two arguments. (A) Even if South Carolina did not lead, some other state or combination of states would have. (B) The leadership of South Carolina was itself fully determined. It was certain to secede first (this reduces the question at issue – the certainty of the secession of the “South” – to the certainty of South Carolinian leadership).

We have already rejected (A). Necessity is not always the mother of invention. Consider the implications of arguing (B). Either South Carolina had qualities that distinguished it from other states in the South or it did not. If it did, these qualities might be used to support the claim that South Carolina seceding first was a certainty. However, to emphasize its distinctiveness is to modify the position that slave states were more alike than different, and contradicts the position that the abolitionist movement caused secession. The object of abolitionism was slavery in general, not slavery in South Carolina. Yet if the other possibility is taken up – that South Carolina had no distinguishing qualities – then it is like other states and the question continues to be: why did South Carolina and not some other state go first, if, by hypothesis, there is no difference among them? This returns us to our starting point.

The probability of being the first to secede was either equal or unequal across the states of the South. If the probabilities were equal, the question remains. Why did South Carolina go first? And if the probability was higher in South Carolina than in

other states, the question is, again, why? Either way, we are compelled to consider the distinctiveness of South Carolina.

There still exists, however, a way to reconcile the position that South Carolina was distinctive with an emphasis on slavery in general, and thus on abolitionism or sectionalism as causes. It might be the case, for example, that South Carolina had extreme values on variables relating to the system of slavery, making the threat of abolition or the problem of sectionalism particularly felt in South Carolina.

There is also an issue of scale. In political terms, secession was a decision vested in the institutions of states, but slavery was a system of household economies distributed across state jurisdictions. The values of variables that defined that system need not be aggregated at the level of states. Why, within the planter class of the system of slavery, was it a particular segment of that class, located in South Carolina, who initiated secession? From the point of view that we are probing, the question should be: why planters individually and severally in one part of the slave system caused secession? Thus, from this point of view, the unit of analysis should be the planter. Yet it was states that seceded.

We have introduced a gap between the institutional decision to secede, vested in states, and the actions of planters. Thus we have introduced the possibility that the uniqueness of South Carolina was related to its institutions and culture or, more generally, to those properties that individuate it from other states and that are indexed by its proper name. We now address a further problem with this argument: did state institutions and culture have effects independent of the slave system?

If those institutions and culture were internal to the slave system, then it might reasonably be argued that slavery was the cause of the secession of South Carolina. Yet if there were planters across the South and if political institutions were internal to slavery, then there should be no difference between and among the institutions of those several states. And if there are no differences, because slavery causes institutions, then why did the state of South Carolina secede first? It is possible, of course, that there were features of the institutions of the state that distinguished it from other states, that these features were not endogenous to slavery *per se* and that they facilitated the act of secession. (Another possibility is that political institutions were only internal to slavery in South Carolina and not in, say, Alabama or Mississippi, and this is why secession occurred first in South Carolina).

Either way, however, an explanation for South Carolinian leadership then must rest, at least in part, on its political institutions and political culture. In one interpretation, however, the institutional and cultural setting is endogenous to slavery, but only in one part or segment of the wider system of slavery. This begs the question of how institutions can be endogenous to a system of variables in one place but not another. (One possible line to take here would be to assert that to talk theoretically of the *system* of slavery is to overestimate its coherence). In another interpretation, however, those institutions are at least partially exogenous to the system of slavery but, consequently, remain unexplained, particularly if we were to claim that slavery tells the entire story of secession in the South.

Alongside the literature on sectional balance, abolition and slavery, there is a large literature on the importance of an ethos of public violence and an ethic of manly honor in Southern states. It is argued that these cultural forces were rooted in slave ownership *per se* or in patriarchy (Barry 2002; Olsen 2000; McCurry 1995; Wyatt-

Brown 1986), and that this ethos made violent secession more likely. This literature, however, is also more compatible with an expectation that secession should have occurred *en masse* rather than sequentially.

One tack to take here is to treat these various conditions – sectionalism, abolitionism, the economy of slavery, the ethos of honor – as necessary but not sufficient for secession. Of course, however, in the larger classes of phenomena that we wrote of in our [Introduction](#), these conditions are not necessary for secession. But then these conditions must be sufficient in the American case. Yet, as we have shown, there are strong reasons to argue that they are insufficient. Thus, there are problems here in using the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions, as well as a continuing problem in using generally distributed variables to explain the specificity of South Carolina.

To summarize this part of the discussion, then, we argue that these types of explanations are not fully specified, that they are not sensitive to issues of time-dependence or sequence in processes of political mobilization and that for these explanations to be fully-specified and thus completed, secession in the South should be understood as a process rather than a simple event. In the next section, therefore, we examine some of the historiography of antebellum South Carolina to identify how the vanguard and first mover in this dynamic process can be politically individuated.

### The political system of South Carolina

A different literature emphasizes the importance of partisan party loyalties, particularly in the lower South, and their breakdown in the mid- to late 1850s in the run-up to secession. This research describes conditions that constrained secession for most of the antebellum period (Holt 1999, 1978). Yet it is important to note that political realignment occurred much earlier in South Carolina, during the Nullification crisis of 1832–1833. It was supporters of nullification who created the “first political party [in the state] organized around discrete issues, as opposed to the personal alliances and antipathies that had previously structured the Carolina political scene” (Young 1999:198; cf. Freehling 1966). No other Southern state seriously considered nullification, let alone passed an ordinance of nullification, even though dissatisfaction with federal tariff policy was widespread throughout the South.

Like other work, we do not focus here only on the crisis that was precipitated by the presidential election of 1860. Rather we treat this crisis as the culmination and end game of a longer process of mobilization and counter-mobilization across sectional lines and within the white South. As Olsen notes, “men in the Deep South had considered secession before in 1832 and 1850” (Olsen 2000:6). We stress, however, that the leader at these moments, as in 1860, was one state-South Carolina.

We also find merit in an even longer time perspective that sees secession and civil war as the final act of the American founding,<sup>1</sup> as long as such an interpretation does

<sup>1</sup> Recall Pocock’s (1972:120) argument that the Revolution was “the last great act of the Renaissance.” We agree on the relevance of republicanism, as our discussion shows. In effect, it was the combination of the reformation and the renaissance (to pursue Pocock’s dramatic turn of phrase) that distinguished American politics. For more discussion, see Meadwell (2003).



not imply a commitment to an overly strong version of path dependence. The emphasis on determinism in some work on path dependence (Mahoney 2000) is incompatible with our emphasis on political contestation. Weaker versions of path dependence that talk of bounded innovation rather than determination are more persuasive, but precisely because they dilute the distinctive characteristics of path dependent historical processes (Meadwell 2005). Other work that sees path dependence as crucial in politics depends on an understanding of politics in which the fundamental character of politics lies in the solutions it provides to problems of public good provision in competitive markets (Pierson 2000). But this understanding of politics is not particularly relevant for this period of American political development because the problem of public good provision presupposes widespread agreement in political society about public goods and political agency in that society, which, in our view, did not characterize antebellum America.

Rather, we take note of this longer time perspective by drawing attention to certain features of the American founding and then linking these features to South Carolina politics. This was a founding that had produced a written constitution that was still a lived experience of the revolutionary generation until well into the nineteenth century. It was, moreover, a founding that was self-consciously understood as an experiment in republican government. One reason why South Carolinian leaders were fairly strict constitutional constructionists after 1820 was that the Constitution held the contradiction between slavery and freedom in place. Further, debate in the white South, and particularly in South Carolina from the 1820s on, replayed central ideological tropes of the Revolution. A watershed event marks the transmission of the revolutionary heritage within South Carolinian politics, and it is closely connected to a turning point in sectional politics – the Missouri Compromise: Charles Pinckney’s speech to Congress in February, 1820.<sup>2</sup>

Pinckney could speak with “unique authority” for South Carolina as a member of the Congress of the Confederation, the Constitutional Convention, and as a four-time governor (Vipperman 1989:197). In this speech, he “arraigned his northern colleagues in a classic display of southern belief in northern conspiracy” (Vipperman: 140) and set out the arguments that would be deployed in the run-up to both nullification and secession. This speech took the classic rhetorical form of resistance to British authorities during the Revolution and turned it to sectional ends.<sup>3</sup> In effect, it implied that the Southern states stood in relation to the American government as the colonies had stood to British authority. The North was conspiring against the South as British

<sup>2</sup> *Annals*, 16th Congress, 1st session, 1310–1329.

<sup>3</sup> According to Greenberg (1976: 366–367; see also Weir [1969:500–501]), this form “compiled lists of grievances,” described “the perception of common forces and purposes operating behind instances of maltreatment,” included “the recognition of a pattern of oppression” and concluded that English ministers were conspiring to limit the freedom of the American colonies. Pinckney’s speech took this form, but was directed at the federal government, as did various state government documents in South Carolina in the run-up to nullification, well before the final act of secession. See, for example, Governor Thomas Bennett, *Message*, 1821; Special Committee Report and Resolutions on the Resolution Directing an Inquiry Into the Nature and Origins of the Federal Government..., December 19, 1827; Committee on Federal Relations, Report and Resolutions on the Government Message Respecting the Federal Government Overstepping Its Constitutional Boundary, December 17, 1830; Governor James Hamilton, *Message*, 1831; Committee on Federal Relations, Report and Resolution Calling For a Convention, December 11, 1832. State and Legislative Papers, State Archives of South Carolina.



authorities had conspired against the colonies. This rhetorical move motivated the further claim that began to dominate the discourse of governors and legislatures of South Carolina in the 1820s, namely that the North was a threat to republican government. The revolutionary debate about factions, minorities and compacts became the political language used by South Carolinian governors and the State Legislature to frame their dissatisfactions. A defense of slavery that did not directly depend on race, namely that slavery was essential in a true republic, was also facilitated, in effect as an attempt to hoist fellow Americans by their republican history. Thus we find some merit in that interpretation of secession and war that sees these outcomes in relationship to the formative moment of the American founding. Yet if history mattered, it was not through path dependence but rather in the sense that no settled equilibrium had emerged that put the written commitments of the constitution out of political play.

Recall that of the eleven states that seceded, only four had been constituent states of the American founding and thus direct heirs to the Revolution: Virginia (1788), Georgia (1788), South Carolina (1788), and North Carolina (1789). The late joiners, such as Texas (1845), Florida (1845), Arkansas (1836), Alabama (1819) Mississippi (1817), Louisiana (1812), and Tennessee (1796), did not go first, even though the dates of joining and the geographical position of most of these states would suggest that their ties to the union were weaker than South Carolina. Yet they did not secede until after South Carolina had done so. Thus, the state that seceded first was a state that had stronger and longer ties to the union. Of these original states, one (Georgia) seceded only after South Carolina; two others seceded only after the initiation of military hostilities (Virginia and North Carolina). As direct heirs to the revolution, their politicians were credible spokesmen for the republican heritage, should they have chosen to take this heritage up in defense of their position within the union. However, Virginia and North Carolina were states that were less dependent on the slave economy than was the economy of South Carolina (see Table 1). They had not profited from the expansion of the cotton economy in the early part of the nineteenth century in the same way as had South Carolina.

In contrast, the cotton boom had extended slavery and the plantation system into the South Carolina upcountry from the coastal regions of the state where the slave economy continued to be tied to rice production. The expansion of cotton production entrenched the importance of slavery within South Carolina, while modifying the economic position of South Carolina within the emerging South. The port of Charleston had been losing ground to the ports of the North in the early years of the nineteenth century. With the southward and southwestern extension of cotton, new rivals also developed in the South, particularly Mobile and New Orleans. Although growing in absolute terms, the port of Charleston was in relative decline as a consequence (Coclanis 1989; Pease and Pease 1985:40–53, 171–188) and its economic and political importance in particular in the South was thus increasingly challenged. Thus leadership emerged in a state that had been a direct party to the original agreements of the founding, whose politicians played an important role in national politics, that depended on export-led slave production and that was beginning to lose ground in the cotton economy of the South.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See also James H. Hammond, Anniversary Oration of the State Agricultural Society of South Carolina, November 25, 1841, and Address Delivered by R. W. Roper Before the State Agricultural Society, November, 1844.

**Table 1** Ratio of slaves to whites and slaveholding to free households in legal slave states

STATE (date of secession)	1820	1830	1860		1860	
					[a + b]	[a × b]
SOUTH CAROLINA 20 December 1860	1.09a	1.22a	1.38a	.46b	1.84	.64
EARLY SECEDERS						
MISSISSIPPI 9 January 1861	.78	.93	1.23	.49	1.72	.60
FLORIDA 10 January 1861	—	—	.79	.34	1.13	.27
ALABAMA 11 January 1861	.49	.62	.83	.35	1.18	.21
GEORGIA 19 January 1861	.79	.73	.78	.37	1.15	.29
LOUISIANA 26 January 1861	.94	1.23	.93	.37	1.30	.34
TEXAS 1 February 1861	—	—	.43	.28	.71	.12
<b>AVERAGE</b>	.75	.88	.83	.37	1.20	.31
LATE SECEDERS						
VIRGINIA 17 April 1861	.70	.68	.47	.26	.73	.12
TENNESSEE 6 May 1861	.24	.26	.33	.25	.58	.08
ARKANSAS 6 May 1861	—	—	.34	.20	.54	.07
NORTH CAROLINA 20 May 1861	.49	.52	.53	.28	.81	.15
<b>AVERAGE</b>	.48	.49	.42	.25	.67	.11
NON-SECEDERS						
DELAWARE	.08	.06	.02	.03	.05	
MARYLAND	.41	.35	.17	.12	.29	
KENTUCKY	.29	.32	.25	.23	.48	
MISSOURI	.18	.22	.11	.13	.24	
<b>AVERAGE</b>	.24	.24	.14	.13	.27	

a: Ratio of slaves to whites

b: Ratio of slave-owning households to total free households

SOURCE: United States Population Census, 1820, 1830, 1860.

Several historians have pointed to the unusual position of South Carolina in ways that help to make sense of its vanguard role. Genovese has argued that “South Carolina, throughout the antebellum period, made fewer concessions than any other states to democratic ideology and practice and thereby invited the clearest and least-conflicted development of an alternate world view” (Genovese 1991:146). Rogers argues that internal unity among whites in South Carolina was achieved in the decade 1800–1810. The extension of cotton production and slavery into the upcountry weakened the divisions between low-country planters and the upcountry that continued to be important in other Southern states (Rogers 1970:19; cf. Hahn 1983:17–18; Crofts 1989:44; Roper 1984:83). The constitutional reforms of 1808 insulated South Carolina from federal party politics and virtually eliminated two party competition (Klein 1990). The creation of South Carolina College in Columbia provided a training ground for the political elite and contributed further to the political integration of the upcountry, although describing this political settlement between upcountry and coastal planters as “internal unity” would be to exaggerate (Durill 1999).<sup>5</sup> As a result, however, “[H]ere was a state in undisputed control of a recognized upper class; here was a republic in which a small group of superior men

<sup>5</sup> Upcountry plantations were dominated by cotton production, low country plantations by rice production. The ratio of slaves to whites was higher in the low country; the ratio of white slaveholding households to free households was higher in the upcountry. The average number of slaves by household was higher in the low country.

were the governors, here was a society dominated by aristocrats. The elements which made South Carolina existed in other States, notably in Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, but they did not pervade these States as completely as they pervaded South Carolina” (Hunt 1920:xv. See also Green 1946:17).<sup>6</sup>

The long run-up to the Civil War, moreover, confirmed the continuing force of classically-inspired republican rhetoric in South Carolina, in ways that reinforce this picture of the state as an archaic fragment of American political culture and, arguably, its most aristocratic society. Two rhetorical tropes invoked republican themes: the relationship between republicanism and slavery, and republicanism’s relation to the problem of political faction.

The purpose of this political rhetoric was to claim that South Carolina remained true to the republican foundations of the American founding. Moreover, the planter class in South Carolina made repeated references to the institution of slavery in the classical republics. The further claim was that the benefits of slavery were available to white men, whether they owned slaves or not. In a different language, the claim was that the benefits of a slave *order* were publicly available to all whites. The subliminal message, of course, was that white non-slaveholders had as much of a stake in slavery as did slaveowners and should, like slaveholders, mobilize to defend it.

The argument that slavery provided the best foundation for republican government flourished in South Carolina (Ford 1991:129, 1988, 1999. Cf., however, Oakes 1990:40–79, 1985). Its success provides support for the conclusion that “to a far greater extent than the rest of the nation or even the rest of the South, the Palmetto State had clung to the republican principles that had provided the ideological framework for the American Revolution” (Faust 1982:40; see, as well, Rogers 1970:24; Kaplanoff 1986:102ff).

Consider this quotation, for example: “Such a course of deliberate hostility, as has characterized the conduct of the citizen of the north towards the south for the last three years, would justify by the law of nations, a declaration of war between independent sovereignties.”<sup>7</sup> Robert Barnwell Rhett did two things in this passage. He set North–South relations within the “law of nations,” effectively encouraging the audience to measure the depth of the division between North and South accordingly.<sup>8</sup> This political language was not new; it had emerged in reports of the Committee on Federal Relations of the South Carolina State Legislature in the 1820s. And as a calculated indication of his measurement of the divide, Rhett anticipated war as recourse, in the face of three years of “deliberate hostility” that have “characterized the conduct of citizens of the North.”

Three years earlier, on December 16 1835, a congressman from Maine presented the first petition to Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. That

<sup>6</sup> Other sources we consulted on the question of South Carolina include Weir (1985) and Banner (1974).

<sup>7</sup> Mr. Rhett’s Address to the Citizens of Beaufort and Colleton County, February 3, 1838. Rhett Papers, South Caroliniana Library (SCL), University of South Carolina. [This address was published in Niles Register and it is an off print of this publication that was consulted in the Rhett Papers].

<sup>8</sup> This political language was not new; it had emerged in reports of the Committee on Federal Relations of the South Carolina State legislature in the late 1820s. See Special Committee Report on the Resolution Directing An Inquiry..., December 19, 1827. State and Legislative Papers. State Archives of South Carolina.

event precipitated, as a counter-move, the first explicit defense of slavery as a positive good in the national legislature, presented by a congressman from South Carolina, James Henry Hammond (Faust 1982:176; Miller 2000:134–139). The memory of that petition and the gag rule that it produced as a compromise measure, as well as the abolitionist postal campaign of 1835 (Wyly-Jones 2001; John 1995:169–205), runs through this public address by Rhett in 1838. “Even in our sister states, these who forbear interfering upon this subject [abolition] from a regard to the constitutional compact of the Union, are abolitionists in principle and feeling. Although they do not approve of the unprincipled course of the abolitionist, they desire and hope to see slavery abolished, and if they had the power, or lay under the responsibility of its existence, they would destroy it in a day.”

Rhett’s response, at the same time, developed an argument that had been taken up in South Carolina. “In the south ... every white man is a privileged being ... the very existence of slavery around him, gives him a loftier tone of independence, and a higher estimate of liberty. *Let it be remembered that no republic has ever yet been long maintained without the institution of slavery*” (emphasis in original). This rhetorical move in the war of words between Southern planters and Northern abolitionists marked a significant departure and escalation. And within the politics of South Carolina, it was but one example of the political argument that the benefits of slaveholding were not limited to slaveholders.

Our focus, therefore, is three episodes in the run-up to the Civil War: the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833<sup>9</sup> in South Carolina, the Compromise of 1850, and the endgame that began with the election of Lincoln. These are linked: outcomes in earlier episodes affected patterns and outcomes in subsequent episodes.<sup>10</sup> South Carolina learned critical lessons about the willingness of the rest of the South to follow their lead in the earlier episodes, which influenced the specific strategy employed in the endgame. Since it is South Carolina’s emergence as a radical vanguard which gives this period analytical coherence, we begin with Nullification.

## The politics of secession

### Nullification

During the nullification crisis of 1832–33, South Carolina forcefully reiterated the concept of state sovereignty through its nullification of federal tariffs – declaring an Act of Congress to be null and void within its borders. The crisis began with a public address by George McDuffie in Charleston in the summer of 1831 in which he linked nullification to secession and to the issue of the tariff (Bartlett 1994:181). This position had the effect and, by most accounts, the purpose of radicalizing the doctrine of nullification elaborated by John Calhoun. That doctrine had asserted the right of a state to veto and refuse to enforce a federal law that it considered unconstitutional. Yet it also included the provision that if three quarters of states

<sup>9</sup> The classic source on the Nullification crisis is Freehling (1966). For critical discussion of his work, see Ochenkowski (1982) and Bergeron (1976).

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of sequence and timing in historical processes, see Pierson (2004, 2000).

affirmed the law after such a challenge, the nullifying state would be bound to enforce the law within its boundaries. Secession may have been implied as a remedy, but effectively only if the federal government had attempted to enforce a law that had not been endorsed after such a challenge (Hatfield 1997:83–99). McDuffie took up the doctrine of nullification but without these qualifications. Nullifiers won the state elections in the fall of 1832. The state legislature quickly established a Nullification Convention and passed an ordinance making the federal tariff void as of February 1 1833.

Nullifiers had a strong hand to play. If nullification succeeded, it would sanction similar challenges on other constitutional issues. Even in losing, they could claim to have shown that there was now no middle ground between submission and disunion (Maier 1981:15ff.).<sup>11</sup> And they played this hand boldly by breaking with an important element that had defined the political settlement between planters on the coast and in the upcountry. They mobilized outside the planter and merchant class (Young 1999).

Two features of the conjuncture facilitated mobilization. First of all, nullification occurred in “the midst of the state’s greatest religious revival” (McCurry 1992:1248). The language of popular evangelicalism made easier the project of popular mobilization outside the inner circle of planters and merchants. “Evangelicism and Nullification... seized the low country’s imagination, united newly converted planter politicians to their newly enfranchised yeoman constituencies in a set of common institutions with a common discourse” (McCurry 1995:157). Second, the early 1830s also marked a change in the organizational structure and strategic orientation of Northern abolitionism. Even if the movement remained nonviolent in its mainstream, abolitionists increasingly entertained “immediatism” rather than colonization as a means of ending slavery (Newman 2002:129–151; Mayer 1998:72–73), and this implied the dissolution of the Union, if “moral suasion” could not induce slaveowners to free their slaves (Reynolds 2005:53, 51), as a way of securing a free northern republic against the corruption of slavery. With this shift away from colonization, mainstream abolitionists may have preferred a preserved union without slavery to disunion with slavery abolished in the North and preserved in the South, but they also preferred disunion to a union in which slavery was preserved. Peaceful preservation of the Union thus became increasingly difficult because these possible versions of the preserved Union were incompatible.

The timing of organizational changes within the abolitionist campaign – including a shift in its center of gravity from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts and the New England Anti-Slavery Society, publication of *Liberator*, and the distribution of abolitionist literature in South Carolina – made it easier for nullifiers to challenge the credentials of their opponents by insinuating that they were aiding the cause of abolition. Unionists noted that the nullification campaign was aided by the timing of abolitionist agitation in the state.<sup>12</sup> Here nullifiers had a political advantage over

<sup>11</sup> See also James H. Hammond’s comment: “I do firmly believe that upon the success of Nullification rests the existence of our present institutions and that there is no other means by which they might be peaceably maintained”. Hammond to Rice, September 22, 1832. Hammond Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>12</sup> Abolitionist literature appeared at a time when the fear of black insurrection had increased in salience because of a slave revolt in Virginia, which recalled an earlier incident in 1822 in the Charleston hinterland. See Channing (1970).

their Unionist opponents. “[U]nionists.... could never quite escape the dilemma of explaining how they could both support the South’s peculiar institution and deny their state’s right to nullify obnoxious federal legislation”(Young 1999:203).

Unionists rejected nullification and some of them feared that the tactics of the nullifiers would destabilize South Carolinian society. Nullification contained “elements of anarchy and civil war”; it was “demago[gery]” and “Jacobinical,” the States Rights party was the “War and Revolution party.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, nullifiers were more willing to mobilize whites outside the planter class than Unionists. By 1831, nullificationists had State Rights and Free Trade Associations in all districts (Kibler 1946:104). Further, once in control of the state government, nullificationists effectively controlled the state militia. Governor Hamilton raised 27,000 men in militias and paramilitary organizations during the Nullification crisis.<sup>14</sup> These newly-formed political associations and paramilitary organizations gave nullifiers an intimidating public presence, which they effectively exploited in displays of men and arms at outdoor meetings, in public halls, and on muster grounds. By all accounts, anti-nullification organization was less successful.

The supporters of Nullification raised the specter of secession in an Address to the People of the United States that was written during the Nullification Convention of 1832, by pointing to the costs to the North “if South Carolina should be driven out of the Union.” “The separation of South Carolina would inevitably produce a general dissolution of the Union; and as a necessary consequence, the protecting system, with all its pecuniary bounties to the Northern States....” Moreover, “if South Carolina be driven out of the Union, all of the other planting states, and some of the Western States, would follow by an almost absolute necessity.”<sup>15</sup> The North, government, industry and commerce alike, had an interest in preserving the Union; thus, to preserve the Union, the government should not maintain the system of protective tariffs. If it did maintain that system, there was a chance that the Union would be dissolved.

Andrew Jackson responded strategically, in part by drawing on his established reputation for toughness. A South Carolina Congressman reported a conversation that concluded with this pleasantry from Jackson, “Please give my compliments to my friends in your state, and say to them, that if a single drop of blood shall be shed there in opposition to the laws of the United States, I will hang the first man I can lay my hands on engaged in such treasonable conduct, upon the first tree I can reach” (Parton 1861 v.3:284–285, quoted in Brands 2005:481). With these words, Jackson recalled his earlier deeds in the Seminole War.

He also worked to isolate Nullifiers in South Carolina by driving a wedge between South Carolina and other states in the South, particularly Virginia and Georgia, (Ellis 1987; Miles 1973:533–544; Klunder 1996:78), who might be drawn into the conflict. Privately, he assured Unionists and anti-nullifiers in South Carolina of federal support. He wrote confidentially to the Secretary of War in October, 1832

<sup>13</sup> Petigru to Pope, November 18 1830; Petigru to Legaré, October 29, 1832; December 21, 1832, SCL.

<sup>14</sup> The crisis, in fact, was the occasion for a thorough review of the militia so as to ensure “the permanent security of the state.” Governor Hayne to the State Legislature, November 29, 1833. State and Legislative Papers. State Archives of South Carolina.

<sup>15</sup> Address to the People of the United States, Report of the Convention of 1832, p.77 and p. 76.

to authorize him to prepare to use force. “If I can judge from the signs of the times, Nullification & secession, or in the language of truth, *disunion* is gaining strength, we must be prepared to act with promptness and crush the monster in its cradle before it matures to manhood.”<sup>16</sup> In late 1832, he dispatched two warships to the South Carolina coast and sent reinforcements to federal facilities in Charleston Harbor. In a public proclamation to South Carolina in December, 1832, he linked nullification in South Carolina to treason. In January, 1833 he requested from Congress approval to use force in South Carolina if necessary to enforce federal laws.

Jackson’s reputation for toughness, gained through several military campaigns and personal duels, made his public actions credible. His public actions matched his private words. Yet he also accepted compromise on the narrow issue of the terms of the tariff.

When the nullification convention reconvened in March, 1833 after the passage of a compromise tariff, the Report [of the “Committee of Twenty One”] concluded that “the firmness of the State seems, at length, in some degree to have triumphed”<sup>17</sup> and secession was abandoned. However, the triumphant note was muted. The core of the Report indicated that tariff policy were not the real concern. “The Federal Government will interfere with every department of the State Governments...This interference will be practiced at first with moderation, and with some apparent respect for the rights of States. Gradually as the power of the Government shall be established, and the Southern States become weakened and less capable of resistance, the shew of moderation will be thrown off...”<sup>18</sup> The compromise on tariffs was, in this vision of the future, a meaningless concession. The threat of secession may have contributed to tariff compromise, this Report implied, but it would not deter the government from further and deeper interference in state rights.

“The leading nullifiers,” a leading Unionist in the upcountry stated after the 1833 convention, “have been induced to stop because they saw that the other states would not go with them” (Perry, quoted in Kibler 1946:156). On this interpretation, however, it was not so much, or merely, the federal tariff compromise that led to the abandonment of secession, but the failure to generate support for secession in the rest of the South. Perry implied that if that support were present, the tariff compromise would not have been sufficient to avoid the secession of the state.

In the meetings of the convention in late 1832, more radical secessionists wanted to force the hand of the American government by proceeding immediately to the passage of the ordinance in the legislature, and by including in it a threat that the use of force against the state to enforce the tariff bill would mean that the state was at once out of the Union. Not all radicals wanted to do both, however. Robert Hayne, for example, argued against delay but did not want to allude to the matter of force at all in the ordinance. Someone who also took this position, George McDuffie, further expected that an ordinance would quickly catalyze support in the South; thus delay was not needed to gain that support.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Jackson to the Secretary of War, December 17, 1832. Emphasis in original, Jackson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Committee of 1833, p.131.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 131.



Barnwell (better known as Robert Barnwell Rhett, after a name change in 1837), however, supported both immediate nullification and provocative language in the ordinance.<sup>19</sup> He was indifferent to the issue of broader support in the South. Not surprisingly, perhaps, not only did he want to reject Clay's compromise tariff bill, he was disappointed when it was passed in March, 1833. Barnwell wanted a military confrontation between the government and the state, and recognized that the compromise, when combined with the threat of force made by Jackson, would make that confrontation less likely. On the other hand, Hayne counselled acceptance of the compromise, recognizing that it was not the right time to press further. "The passage of Clay's Bill according to the general opinion here will settle our controversy with the General Government for the present. Still we must not relax our efforts until we see what course the convention will take [a reference to the session of the state convention that was to abandon nullification in March 1833]."<sup>20</sup>

Unionists in the state "virtually vanished" and, after Nullification, "the distinction between majority and minority [in the state] measured increasingly only a difference over the timing of secession" (Pease and Pease 1995:66) and, we would add, measured the difference between unilateral and cooperative secessionists. In the words of another historian, "some of the members of the Union party left the state, and some who remained as the years passed, gave up the hopeless struggle against the predominating doctrine of State supremacy.... By the time the Civil War came there were fewer Union men in South Carolina than there were in any other Southern State" (Hunt 1920:ix).

Unionist leaders in this state who had fought against Nullification acknowledged during the crisis and afterward that state politics had been transformed. Poinsett, a leading Unionist during the crisis,<sup>21</sup> wrote to Jackson at the height of the crisis that "the object of these rash and reckless men is to bring on the question of secession...."<sup>22</sup> Perry, a key Unionist figure in the upcountry, concluded at the end of the crisis that "[n]ullification is not dead, but *sleepeth*. The grand object is disunion, and it will be attempted again" (Perry Journal, April 13 1833, quoted in Kibler 1946:160. Emphasis in original). He expected that "the disposition to dissolve the Union... will show itself more plainly in the course of a few years" (quoted in Kibler, 156).

By using the tariff issue as a stalking horse, radical secessionists permanently changed the balance of political forces in the state. The result was a precocious rejection of nationally-defined political cleavages that put local Unionists on the

<sup>19</sup> P.M. Butler to James H. Hammond, November 20 1832; William C. Clifton to Hammond, November 21, 1832; Butler to Hammond, December 18, 1832. Hammond Papers, Library of Congress. In fact, the Ordinance concluded, "... we will construe passage, by Congress, of any act, authorizing the employment of a military or naval force against the State of South Carolina her constituted authorities... or any other act on the part of the Federal Government, to coerce the State... as inconsistent with the longer continuance of South Carolina in the Union, and that the people of this State thenceforth hold themselves absolved from all further obligation to maintain or preserve their political connexion with the people of the other States and will forthwith proceed to organize a separate Government, and do all other acts and things which Sovereign and independent States may of right do."

<sup>20</sup> Robert Y. Hayne to James H. Hammond, March 6, 1833. Hammond Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>21</sup> See also Poinsett to Jackson, December 17, 1832. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup> Poinsett to Jackson, January 7, 1833. Jackson Papers.

defensive. Moreover, this political realignment within the state had little or nothing directly to do with the sectional issue – that is, the terms of admission for new states.

From nullification forward to 1860

Local politicians with varying degrees of commitment to secession noted that South Carolina had played a radical card *too early* in Southern politics in 1832. “Until my last visit to Mississippi, I was by no means aware of the extent of the prejudice against South Carolina, on account of the Doctrines of 1832”. And another wrote that “... the action of South Carolina without the concurrence of some other principal Southern State would be impolitic and injurious to the common cause of Southern Rights, inasmuch as such a course would reawaken that jealousy and suspicion which has been entertained towards her by some of the other States ever since the days of Nullification.”<sup>23</sup>

Radical secessionists bided their time, keeping in mind that it was a question of catching the right instant. During the secession crisis of 1852, following the passage of the Compromise of 1850 in the U.S. Congress and the failed conference of Southern states, South Carolina went to the brink of secession only to back down at the last minute. Secessionists again recognized the problem of leadership and timing. Issac Hayne (clerk of the Nullification Convention in 1832 and later South Carolina’s agent in Washington in early 1861) recognized the dilemma. “It was *because* he was so firmly persuaded that the slave-holding States could never be prosperous, could never be safe in permanent connexion, with the so-called Free States, that most of all he deplored this most unfortunate attempt at premature secession. *A change in the public sentiment of the South* was the only sure foundation on which to build. It had not yet advanced sufficiently to justify the movement proposed.”<sup>24</sup> During this crisis, the state convention of South Carolina managed only to affirm the existence of a right to secede, which few in this state (and in the South as a whole) doubted by 1852. Cooperationist secessionists could not yet be brought along to support unilateral secession. Radical secessionists learned from these episodes, however: Too early, you break your neck; too late, you lose your time.

The actions of the other sovereign states that made up the South were far from certain. These states might choose secession, or they might – as they had in the past – choose to abandon South Carolina at the critical moment. How, then, was secession among a group of diverse sovereign entities to be accomplished? South Carolinian elites developed a strategy that would accomplish secession not only among the suggestible Deep South states but also among Upper South states and, it was hoped, the Border South states.

South Carolina’s next effort to mobilize the white South for radical action came in early 1860 and centered on Virginia, which had just suffered a murderous raid at the hands of the radical abolitionist, John Brown. Unlike Garrison and other mainstream

<sup>23</sup> Wallace to Seabrook, November 7, 1849, Seabrook Papers, Library of Congress; David Johnson to Edward Johnson, October 2, 1850. Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association (1939), p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Proceedings of the Great Southern Co-Operation and Anti-Secession Meeting, September 23 1851. Italics in original.

abolitionists, Brown, from at least 1840, had accepted the necessity of the violent overthrow of slavery (Reynolds 2005:50–55, 95–137). On the expectation that Brown's failed raid had made Virginians aware of the threat to slavery posed by the rise of abolitionism in the North, the legislature of South Carolina sent Christopher Memminger to Virginia to mobilize support for a convention "to concert measures for united action" (Capers 1893:241–242).

Neither Brown's raid nor the likely Republican victory in the coming presidential election was sufficient to radicalize the state, however. Virginia would not agree to a Southern Convention. At the conclusion of his mission, Memminger, until this point a long time moderate and cooperationist, wrote that the more radical states of the Deep South must "be compelled to act, and to drag after us these divided states."<sup>25</sup> He knew "of no remedy but secession and that of course must be at home."<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, given South Carolina's experience with previous efforts to mobilize states for cooperative action to meet threats to Southern interests, the failure in Virginia was a boon for the secessionist program. In effect, the refusal of Virginia to take the lead virtually guaranteed that the Southern resistance movement would be led by South Carolina. This, in turn, made secession – in one state at least – more likely. Even if South Carolina decided to secede alone and was abandoned by the rest of the South, it would have the benefit of a cordon of sympathetic states between it and the federal government, making invasion or coercion difficult. This would allow South Carolina (and other more radical states of the Deep South if they followed) to secede without fear of immediate reprisal. Although the Border and Upper South states were unwilling to secede, they might be unwilling to allow South Carolina to be coerced to remain in the Union by the federal government.

The summer and fall of 1860 were spent mobilizing support within South Carolina for secession and informing other states of these plans, so as to gain assurances from these states that coercion would be resisted if it came. By early autumn of 1860, the decision to secede had all but been made. What remained to be determined was the probable reaction of the other states of the South. To make this determination, South Carolina's governor, William Gist, wrote to the governors of North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Gist's brother, appropriately named States Rights Gist, delivered the letters. We refer here to the letter Governor Gist sent to Governor Moore of Louisiana in order to provide an illustration of the political calculations they contained. Gist wrote: "It is the desire of South Carolina that some other State should take the lead, or at least move simultaneously with her. She will unquestionably call a convention as soon as it is ascertained that a majority of the electors will support Lincoln." He continued, "If a single State secedes, she will follow her. If no other State takes the lead, South Carolina will secede (in my opinion) alone, if she has any assurance that she will soon be followed by another or other States; otherwise it is doubtful."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Christopher G. Memminger to William Porcher Miles, 24 January 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher G. Memminger to William Porcher Miles, 6 February 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>27</sup> William Henry Gist to Governor Thomas Moore, 5 October 1860, William Henry Gist Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

This letter set out the preference structure of most of the political class in South Carolina. Their first hope was that another state would take the lead. If this was not possible, they hoped that another state (or group of states) would act in concert with South Carolina. Third, if South Carolina had assurances that another state would soon follow, South Carolina would secede alone. This signaled the state's willingness to take a calculated risk; absent a credible commitment, which was virtually impossible to obtain in the American states-union, the politicians of the state could never be completely certain of the reaction of other states to its secession.

The responses that were received during the following weeks ranged from encouraging to very discouraging. The responses provided less than a precommitment from other states, but they gave some reason to proceed unilaterally, on the expectation that this first step would change the calculations of some other states. Governors John Ellis of North Carolina, Thomas Moore of Louisiana, and Joseph E. Brown of Georgia wrote that secession would not and should not follow the election of Lincoln. Governors John J. Pettus of Mississippi, A.B. Moore of Alabama, and M.S. Perry of Florida wrote that while they would not secede alone, they would be influenced by the actions of one or more other states, signaling that they would likely secede if South Carolina took the lead.

### The end game

As early as the presidential election of 1832, every state in the Union gave the electorate the power to elect presidential electors – every state, that is, except South Carolina. Consistent with its long-standing (pseudo)aristocratic and anti-democratic tradition, South Carolina gave this authority to its legislature. Thus, when news of Lincoln's November 6, 1860 election arrived, the state's legislature was in session and ready to act. Others in the state were preparing for the state to take some radical action as well. For example, a number of federal officials in the state, including federal Judge A.G. Magrath and federal District Attorney James Connor, resigned their positions upon learning of the election outcome (Rogers 1992:43).

In November 1860, the debate in South Carolina was not between union and disunion, but the timing of the secession convention. Supporters of unilateral secession wanted to move quickly, with a convention in mid-December, while the sting of the election of Lincoln was still felt. Supporters of a late convention, who desired that disunion be initiated by another state, thought a January convention was more appropriate. Initially, it appeared that the late-conventioners had the upper hand in the state legislature. In the interest of unanimity, the supporters of an early convention agreed to go along with the later convention date.

As the South Carolina legislature was in the process of passing the late convention bill, a number of events occurred that forced the legislature to reconsider the earlier date. For example, a large contingent of Georgians arrived in Charleston to celebrate the completion of the Charleston–Savannah Railroad, the first direct rail linkage between the two Southern cities. On the night of 9 November 1860, a secession rally, evidently attended by both the Georgia contingent and citizens of Charleston, took place in which the South Carolina legislature was urged to call for a convention “at the earliest possible moment” (Potter 1976:490). The Charleston *Mercury*, which was, up to this point, very critical of actions taken by the legislature,

claimed that the public was extremely dissatisfied with the legislature's caution.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the state of Georgia signaled its intention to call its own secession convention and a rumor – premature, as it turned out – reached South Carolina that U.S. Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia had resigned his seat in the U.S. Senate.<sup>29</sup>

Before the state legislature could pass the bill calling for an earlier convention, its members had to convince those who remembered what had happened to the state in 1832 and 1852. Some were not convinced that South Carolina's unilateral secession would be followed sequentially by secession in the other states of the South. It was the upcountry, in particular, where remnants of unionism and cooperationism remained that was the area of most concern. But, as state senator John Cunningham of Charleston put it, it was “better to lose York District [an upcountry district] through haste than Alabama through delay.” Better, in other words, to give up some support within the state if moving quickly promised support elsewhere in the South.

Thus, by this point, the calculation had subtly changed. Cunningham's position implied that the likelihood of support from outside the state was high, so high that it should affect mobilization plans within the state. The referent group was becoming the South as a whole, rather than South Carolina alone.

Cunningham asked: “When they invoke us to lead, is there a cooperationist on the floor that will ask us to wait until cooperation is tendered, or will he not tender it by taking the lead?”<sup>30</sup> Cunningham thus cleverly challenged upcountry cooperationists to accomplish cooperation by agreeing to secede unilaterally, a possibility that would have seemed politically incoherent in 1832 or 1852. By 1860, however, the differences between unilateral and cooperative secession in South Carolina had become less important because of the convergence of opinion, both elite and popular, around the option of secession across much of the South. Cooperationists now could be persuaded that a unilateral move would indeed set in motion a chain reaction.

Cunningham succeeded. On November 10, 1860, the South Carolina House altered the convention bill passed by the State Senate, changing the date the convention would meet to December 17, and changing the date of the election of convention delegates to December 6. The South Carolina Senate approved the changes made in the House and passed the altered convention bill unanimously.<sup>31</sup> With the passage of this bill, South Carolina moved closer to unilateral secession, though there were still those whose concerted action could put the movement at risk.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Charleston Mercury*, Saturday, 10 November 1860. Recounting a secession rally featuring prominent citizens of South Carolina and Georgia, the writer noted the following: “Were our Representatives at Columbia at the meeting last night... they would no longer falter or hesitate over what their constituents so ardently desire them to accomplish.”

<sup>29</sup> *Charleston Mercury*, Saturday, 10 November 1860.

<sup>30</sup> John Cunningham in the South Carolina House of Representatives, 10 November 1860, reported in *Charleston Daily Courier*, 12 December 1860.

<sup>31</sup> State of South Carolina Senate Journal, called session, November 1860, page 22; Cauthen (1941), “South Carolina's Decision”; McCarter's Journal, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup> John Berkley Grimball to Elizabeth Grimball, 12 November 1860, John Berkley Grimball Papers, Manuscript Collection, Duke University.

Waiting until his final State of the Union address on December 3, 1860, out-going president James Buchanan responded, placing blame for the current crisis on anti-slavery forces in the North. On the question of secession, he was quite clear: “the election of any one of our fellow-citizens to the office of President does not of itself afford just cause for dissolving the Union.” There was, according to Buchanan, no right to secede, but “no such power has been delegated to Congress or to any other department of the federal government” to coerce a state back into the Union should it secede.

Buchanan had not raised the stakes as Jackson had in the Nullification crisis. Nor did Buchanan have Jackson’s reputation for toughness. A large window of opportunity for potential secessionists had opened. Buchanan had signaled that any state that was determined to secede would be able to do so without fear of coercion – at least until Lincoln’s March 1861 inauguration.

Moreover, the region of compromise between the federal government and slave states had become much smaller. Two days after the State of the Union address, actors in the legislative process began to attempt to fashion a compromise (the “Crittenden Committee,” the Committee of Thirty-Three), as had been successfully accomplished during the Nullification crisis. These efforts were not backed by a strong demonstration of resolve within the office of the executive, as they were in the Nullification crisis. Moreover, compromise on tariffs is typically a feasible result of political logrolling. Tariff rates are continuous, divisible, and specific to particular types of economic activity, and thus various compromises exist. Until the 1860 election, slavery, in fact, also was (imperfectly) divisible (and particular to types of economic activity). Territorial expansion provided a very crude way of “dividing” slavery according to territory. As territorial expansion reached its limits, however, that solution would become increasingly less feasible. Even without completely fixed boundaries, the political question had become: Is slavery acceptable *anywhere* within this territory?

The election for convention delegates, held on December 6, 1860, followed a long established pattern of uncontested elections in South Carolina. One observer of events in a parish of South Carolina in 1860 wrote, “men there simply ‘could not vote for the union’” (Quoted in McCurry, 1995:297; see also Kibler [1938]). First hand witness of South Carolinian attitudes Edmund Ruffin noted, “Every opinion is favorable to the action of the legislature. Since I have been here, I have not heard of a dissenting opinion, either from or of man or woman in S.C.” (Scarborough 1972:493). In the less-radical upcountry, hastily prepared tickets – including one featuring a prominent Unionist, B.F. Perry – did not do well (Wooster 1962:15; Kibler 1946:343). No one elected on December 6, 1860 voted against the December 20 ordinance of secession.

By the time the convention actually met, all that remained was to formalize the decision to secede. After voting to move the convention from Columbia to Charleston (a smallpox scare), the members of the convention voted to repeal the ordinance of 1788, which approved the United States Constitution. South Carolina seceded from the Union.

South Carolina was able to do what it seemed no other state was willing to accomplish: secede from the Union unilaterally. With the secession of South Carolina, the other states of the Deep South were more willing to take action than



they otherwise would have been. While they did not enjoy the same unity as South Carolina on the question of secession, all states of the Deep South seceded, meeting in Montgomery, Alabama in February to create the Southern Confederacy.

The states of the Upper South did not secede as a result of the election of Lincoln, but did so once it became clear that the federal government intended to coerce the states that had seceded. The forces acting within the states that seceded immediately after South Carolina – Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas – were qualitatively similar to those in South Carolina, although planter dominance was slightly less complete in these states than in South Carolina (Greenberg 1977) – demonstrating, again, that South Carolina’s uniqueness was a matter of degree. The late-seceders – Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina – seceded only after the shelling of Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s April 15th proclamation that called up troops to quell the rebellion – that is, after the choice situation had changed.

Non-seceders – Maryland, Missouri, Kentucky, and Delaware – were precariously balanced between North and South. These four states were Northern in many respects: as measured by the attitudes and orientations of their populations and in some cases their industrial capacities, but they were also slaveholding states. However, unlike the Deep South and, to a lesser extent, the Upper South, the slaveholders of the Border South did not hold sway in the halls of state governments, and the institution of slavery affected a comparatively small proportion of the population. The limited extent of slave-ownership had the added effect of eliminating the fear of dependence and the fear of political dominance of freed slaves that was so common in high-slaveholding areas.

South Carolina seceded unilaterally in order to precipitate secession among the other states of the Deep South and, eventually, the Upper South. This decision was politically shrewd. It was based on the calculation that the states of the Deep South lacked only the will to act first. In leading by choosing unilateral secession, radical secessionists also limited the options available to the federal government. If the federal government attempted after unilateral secession to coerce the seceded state(s), radical secessionists calculated that the less radical states of the slave South would reject coercion and secede to join the new Confederacy. If the federal government chose not to coerce the seceded states, the new Confederacy could live in peace. And, eventually this unwillingness to coerce would convince “unseceded” slave states that secession could be accomplished with few costs. Peaceful separation would be permanent and the Confederacy quickly enlarged.

Some elements of the federal government and some Southern Unionists held almost exactly the opposite point of view – that separation would not be permanent and that it would be limited to the Deep South. The secessionist states would eventually return, as long as the federal response was to let them go peacefully in the first instance. In effect, this was an argument that secession would prove not to be feasible in the medium term (and that the populations of the seceding states would eventually replace leaders who supported secession and the Confederacy). Separation would be temporary and reunion would be peaceful. However, to concede separation peacefully on the basis of this conjecture would be a gamble and, with the formation of a Southern government in March, 1861, secession looked increasingly permanent. Secession would create a serious territorial and potentially



hostile rival in the neighborhood. This kind of calculation would suggest that it was better to fight sooner rather than later (Crofts 1989:389).

## Conclusion

Secession was not a simple kind of event. Secession was sequential and patterned. Thus the question of how a compound, sequenced, and patterned process such as the secession of the South was instantiated is important, given the multiple paths of secession across political jurisdictions equally consistent with the increased likelihood of secession associated with abolitionist mobilization. We have addressed this latter issue of instantiation by analyzing the process of political mobilization in the antebellum white South – the early emergence of radical secessionism in South Carolina and the consequences of its leadership for coordinated political mobilization within the states-union. The American states-union facilitated, yet also complicated secession. The organization of states in a union made secession a focal point for political agitation yet, at the same time, the secession of the white South had to be coordinated across these political boundaries. Secession could, in principle, have been simultaneous. Secession, however, occurred sequentially and dynamically. Moreover, several different sequences of secession were, in principle, possible.

However, one state emerged as the vanguard and other states followed. As a consequence, the question of timing and agenda-setting was of central importance in the process of mobilization. In light of these arguments, with which we began the article, we have been led to consider when and how a vanguard state emerged, and how radical secessionists proceeded, as they considered the probable consequences of alternative political strategies for maximizing the likelihood of secession, both within South Carolina and across the South.

The relationship between racial composition and the timing of secession, presented earlier in the article in Table 1, is generally monotonic, particularly if one takes as an index the additive or multiplicative interaction of slaves to whites and slaveholding to free households, and keeping in mind that these secessions were not independent events. The probability of secession in later states was influenced by earlier outcomes in other states.

South Carolina is distinguished by its combination of relatively widespread slaveholding and relatively large numbers of slaves. This pattern might suggest that mobilization in defense of slavery and in support of secession could draw independently on fears among whites of a white society overrun by former slaves and on the economic stakes associated with slaveholding if slavery were to be abolished. Yet the goal of radical secessionists in South Carolina was not simply to mobilize locally in defense of slavery but to mobilize locally in such a way as to increase the likelihood of more general secession across the white South. Their interest was in turning “revolution in one country” into a more general revolution. We have been interested in identifying the mechanisms that were associated with mobilization within South Carolina and with the vanguard strategy of sequential exit.

We have argued that the South was a political construction. The actions of states in the South were not strictly determined by structure or culture, but were influenced as well by the strategic choices of politicians in the vanguard state. Our analysis of three key moments – particularly Nullification but also the Compromise of 1850 and the political endgame – supports these arguments. The Nullification movement radicalized the politics of South Carolina in ways that did not occur in other slave states yet, at the time, left South Carolina relatively isolated politically. Radical secessionists in South Carolina rejected, although not without debate, “secession in one state,” in effect as premature, and as a consequence acknowledged the importance of broader support and thus the problem of mobilization and coordination across multiple political jurisdictions. Still, the politics of nullification permanently changed the balance of political forces in the state and as a consequence a vanguard for secession was created within the South.

What kind of process and what kind of political project was secession? Much of the contemporary literature on comparative historical analysis emphasizes the relevance of turning points or critical junctures linked to path dependent processes of reproduction.<sup>33</sup> Its underlying model does not appear appropriate here. It is difficult to identify a settled equilibrium that could be said to have been reproduced long enough to count as equilibrium in this model, and that could be said to have changed once path dependent processes of reproduction decayed, or as a consequence of exogenous shocks. So, for example, the crisis of Nullification is important in our interpretation, not because it was a critical juncture in this sense, but because it gave visibility and relevance to a political option, to that point not fully articulated as a possible solution to sectional problems. The Nullification episode enlarged the feasible set of political options and, for this reason, changed the trajectory of political contestation. Yet nothing was “locked-in,” and the period between Nullification and the outbreak of military conflict was not a phase of path-dependent reproduction of a settled equilibrium. Rather, this phase was a time-dependent process of political mobilization and contestation characterized by a complex strategic structure.<sup>34</sup>

Radical secessionists mobilized support for secession among South Carolina slaveowners and minimized opposition to secession among non-slaveowners, particularly in the South Carolina upcountry, where white yeoman farming was not dominated by slaveholders, especially large slave holders, and where whites outnumbered blacks. The upcountry had been one of the few sites of Unionist support during the Nullification crisis of the early 1830s. By the time of the endgame, its white farmers had not been converted to enthusiastic support for secession; however, they accepted the outcome, unlike some other parts of the Southern upcountry such as the mountain regions of western Virginia that actively resisted secession from the Union in defense of slavery.

<sup>33</sup> For recent work on institutionalism, path dependence, and historical analysis, see Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), Pierson (2004), Streeck and Thelen (2005).

<sup>34</sup> On time-dependence in collective action and choice, see Granovetter (1978), Schelling (1978), Lohman (1998). For an excellent broader discussion of the methodological implications of strategic interaction and path dependence, see Hall (2003).

This slow process of political change in the upcountry, from resistance to Nullification culminating in “acquiesce[nce]” to secession (West 2005:104), does not appear to be a simple consequence of the persuasiveness of rhetorical appeals to liberty, republicanism, or male mastery, or of a political culture that inculcated these ideals. Rather, from the 1830s onward, non-slave-owners in the upcountry were increasingly politically isolated in a state that was controlled by slaveholding secessionists. They were vulnerable at critical points, both in the Nullification crisis and the endgame, to intimidation.

By 1860, they could have little impact on the political future of the state and little political future if they did not accept the fate set for them by politicians in the low country. They had been put in the position of deciding what to resist: physical coercion by South Carolina and then the Confederacy, or by the Union, rather than a choice between secession or the preservation of the Union. Their choices had been narrowed and modified over time as a result of the success of the secessionist party and its ability to set the political agenda. There was, then, little room left for political maneuver in the face of sustained secessionist mobilization over the previous thirty years within the state, the much higher likelihood in 1860 that unilateral secession in South Carolina would spur other states in the South to secede with her, and the prospect that a military confrontation with the Union would follow that would induce other states to join the early seceders.

Finally, there were differences within the secessionist vanguard. At critical moments of decision such as the Nullification crisis and the Compromise of 1850, there were radical secessionists in South Carolina who preferred immediate secession, even if it meant that secession would be a unilateral act, unsupported by other states. However, the dominant tendency within the vanguard from Nullification onward rejected unilateral secession as a political option. Yet the goal of secession was not abandoned or sacrificed; rather the decision was to bide one’s time until the moment was ripe and the likelihood of support from other states was higher. This difference over timing is a classic political problem, particularly when the stakes are high, and can be expressed succinctly: Too early, you break your neck. Too late, you lose your time. When John Cunningham argued in the South Carolina State Legislature in 1860 that to delay a decision to secede would mean the loss of the support of Alabama, it was no longer the fear of seceding too early that was expressed but, rather, the fear of seceding too late to catch the moment.

A complete treatment of the process of secession across the entire South from the moment secession was threatened for the first time in 1832 until sequential secession was realized in 1860–61 escapes the confines of a single article. This article provides an analysis of core parts of that process from the first threat to the endgame. While our emphasis has been on the politics of South Carolina, we have taken into account from the start the issue of coordination and cooperation across state boundaries by recognizing and analyzing the mobilization dilemma that motivated secessionists in South Carolina: How to mobilize locally in ways that encouraged or facilitated broader participation in other political jurisdictions in the South. We do spend some time discussing mobilization in the broader South at critical points, in light of this dilemma. We discuss why pivotal states such as Georgia and Virginia did not get on board during the Nullification crisis; we discuss broader mobilization during the end game. We do not think that a fuller

analysis would fall outside the confines of our theoretical argument. Rather, given the way we have set up the problem of secession in this article, our approach would lend itself to a fuller treatment across all of the South of the complex process of political mobilization that began with the threat of secession in 1832 and culminated 30-odd years later in sequential secession. In particular, however, the dynamics of mobilization in the later states need more analysis than we have given them here. We acknowledge as well the importance of a fuller treatment of abolitionist organization and mobilization in the North.

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