2017

The James Blair Historical Review, Volume 8:2 (Spring 2018)

Barrett Mills
The College of William and Mary, bjmills01@email.wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jbhr

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jbhr/vol8/iss2/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Blair Historical Review by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The James Blair Historical Review

Volume 8, Issue 2
(Spring 2018)

Editorial Board

Editor-in-Chief
Barrett Mills
Managing Editor
Jacob Manvell
Layout Editor
Yutong Zhan

Peer Reviewers

Matthew Cohen  Natalie White  Sara Clark
Ryan Conner  Ana Murias  Abby Whitlock
Zoë Connor  Samantha Slusher  Grant Wong
Sara Donovan  Sonja Sponholz  Luke Campopiano
Margaret Duke  Joseph P Teknus  Taylor Galanides

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Ayfer Karakaya-Stump

https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jbhr/vol8/iss2/1
Editor’s Note

This Spring 2018 edition of the James Blair Historical Review marks a milestone in our publication’s history—never before has our journal released two issues in one academic school year. The sheer level of work to produce just one issue has typically required two semesters of investment. However, with a great deal of effort on behalf of our editing team and peer reviewers, we managed to push our boundaries and produce not one, but two compilations of exemplary undergraduate historical research for the Fall 2017-Spring 2018 academic year. Given that additional issues grant students more opportunities to share their stellar work with the rest of the world, we hope that publishing bi-annually will become an ongoing practice for our journal.

But besides starting this new convention, we also revived an earlier tradition—publishing an issue in print. The last time our journal existed in a physical form was 2014. I believe that history is best consumed from old-fashioned ink on paper, so I am happy to announce that physical copies of the Spring 2018 issue of the James Blair Historical Review will be available in early Fall 2018 for students and faculty of the College of William & Mary, as well as visitors.

Of course, none of these achievements would have been possible without tremendous support from many people. I would like to thank my fellow editors for suggesting article revisions to authors and formatting this issue, and our peer reviewers for highlighting the articles most fitting for publication. I would also like to thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Stump, for overseeing our journal’s progress this past year. Lastly, I would like to extend my greatest appreciation for every author who submitted articles to our journal. Our publication would not exist without their assistance, and we wish we could publish all of the amazing papers that we receive. Alas, only four could make the cut for this issue, but I am incredibly pleased with the results—and I hope you, the reader, will share the same sentiment. Thank you for engaging with our Spring 2018 issue, and please enjoy the subsequent 70+ pages of excellent historical research.

Sincerely,
Barrett Mills
Editor-in-Chief
## Table of Contents

**Stirring Appeals:**

Elite Southern Women, Confederate Fasts, and Christian Unity  
*Daniel Burns*

Page 7

**Overseers' Quest for Control in the WPA Slave Narratives**

*Delia Karamouzis*

Page 23

**International Waters:**

Putting Hawaii Back in the American Civil War  
*Rebecca Leidenheimer*

Page 51

**Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom:**

*Erik Roberts*

Page 60

---

**Online:** In addition to this printed issue, the *James Blair Historical Review* can be accessed online through our website <https://publish.wm.edu/jbhr/>.  
About the Authors

Daniel Burns is a senior at the College of William and Mary majoring in history and finance with a concentration in business analytics. His research interests include colonial American history, the African diaspora, the history of the American presidency, and American religious history from the colonial era through the Civil War. He will join Ernst & Young’s risk advisory practice in Tysons Corner, Virginia after graduating in May of this year. He hails from Columbia, New Jersey.

Delia Karamouzis hails from Rockville Centre, New York. She is a Junior at Boston College, majoring in History with a minor in Management and Leadership. Delia was recently selected to the Boston College Chapter of the Alpha Sigma Nu Honor Society. She is a proud dual citizen of the United States and Greece, and during the Fall 2017 semester she studied abroad in Thessaloniki, Greece. In her spare time, Delia serves as a trip leader for the Appalachia Volunteers Program of Boston College and a volunteer manager for the BC Varsity Baseball Team. After graduation, she plans to attend law school and pursue a career in sports law.
**Rebecca Leidenheimer**  
is a sophomore history major at the College of William & Mary. Her research interests include the global seventeenth century, onomastics, the antebellum United States, and the history of historic preservation. She works part-time as an education guide at Historic Jamestowne and hopes to work on future projects that interpret Jamestown's history.

---

**Erik Roberts**  
is a fourth-year history student at the University of Virginia. He became interested in Cold War history after taking a foreign relations history course with distinguished historian Melvyn Leffler, and he became interested in southern African history after spending a summer studying in Cape Town. Erik wrote his included piece with guidance from his advisors, Melvyn Leffler and James Loeffler, as well as with the assistance of a Harrison research grant from the University's Undergraduate Research Network. Erik will be moving to New York City upon graduation from UVA to pursue a career in management consulting.
Stirring Appeals: Elite Southern Women, Confederate Fasts, and Christian Unity

Daniel Burns

Introduction

Amidst the turmoil of the American Civil War, Confederate President Jefferson Davis established national days of fasting to instill within the South what he considered ethical, religious ideals. During those fasts, Davis intended for Southerners to pray to the Christian God and abstain from eating and drinking to reinforce a Confederate sense of religious purpose and identity. But what of those social groups, such as elite Southern women, that had no say in the creation of these fasting days? How did those fasts affect them and their desires for Christian unity throughout the South? Regardless of where they lived and their denominations, elite Southern women’s religiosity combined with their support for Davis to inspire their attendance of fast-day religious sermons throughout the conflict.

In the war’s first year, fast-day sermons’ espousals of Confederate righteousness calmed elite women’s early-war anxieties and rendered them disinclined to emphasize collective fast-day adherence. However, after years of hardships and military defeats, women could no longer merely accept that God favored the South—though their religiosity sustained their attendance at fasting services. The sermons that ministers delivered during national fasts in the second half of the war explained Confederate failures as God’s punishment for Southerners’ sins, and thus helped convince elite women that collective Southern adherence to fasting days would help appease their god. After 1862, Southern women stopped writing of how fasting services alleviated their fears; instead, they

“Stirring Appeals”
desired collective Southern compliance with national fasts to ensure future Confederate success.\(^3\)

The argument that elite women appealed for collective Southern fasting in the war’s second half adds two dimensions to contemporary Civil War historiography. First, current scholarship on transformations in Southern women’s wartime relationships with Confederate officials often overlooks elite women. Stephanie McCurry’s *Confederate Reckoning* argues that Southern “women citizens’ relationship with the state dates from the Civil War…. With the war, the necessity and frequency of citizens’ communications with state governors increased exponentially and a growing portion came from women.”\(^4\) McCurry limits her argument mainly to non-elite women. Yet by 1863, elite women occasionally reprimanded soldiers and officers who did not meet their standards of fast-day adherence. As the war progressed, they unintentionally mimicked their non-elite counterparts by increasingly defying antebellum notions of proper gender relations. By the war’s second half, both the non-elite women about whom McCurry writes and the elite women in this essay considered it necessary to address male officials with their wartime concerns.

Second, historians who have covered religion in the American Civil War have neglected to discuss how women reacted to Confederate fasts. Scholarship on Confederate fasting days focuses mainly on how CSA officials and Southern ministers interpreted the importance of those national events. An example of this sort of examination includes historian James Farmer’s *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, which discusses certain characteristics common to many early-war fasting sermons.\(^5\) Yet an analysis of how elite women regarded Confederate fasts reveals how wider portions of the Southern population—those whose gender restrained them from establishing national fasting days or preaching during them—understood the relationship between government and religion. Such an analysis clarifies how the South’s wealthiest group of disenfranchised civilians connected their prewar religious convictions to their support for the Confederacy through their near-unanimous defense of the national fasts that their government established. Perhaps most importantly, an examination of Southern
women’s interpretations of Confederate fasts takes another step towards explaining how the entire Southern populace engaged with and understood the purpose of national fasting days. It provides a perspective on the topic that complements other historians’ research on how Southern sources of secular and religious authority interpreted Confederate fasts.

Factors Influencing Fasting

Two factors primarily influenced elite Southern women’s support for fasting days throughout the war. First, antebellum religious developments predisposed elite women to engage in national fasts. Although men filled ministerial positions throughout the South, women also played roles in prewar religious functions and societies. As historian Jon Butler explains, antebellum white women “frequently found opportunities to exercise spiritual leadership in the interstices of male-dominated Protestant denominations” and “worked in their own [religious] institutions outside the denominations.”

As an example, elite Southern women participated in the American Sunday School Union since its inception in 1817. Females in the organization created Christian Sunday schools for children in the country’s rural areas. Participation in such a society granted elite women decades of experience in spreading Christianity throughout the South by the war’s start.

Southern women’s prewar religiosity convinced at least some of them that antebellum presidents had the authority to declare national fasts. Mary Jeffreys Bethell, a slaveholder from North Carolina, wrote on January 1, 1861 that “South Carolina has seceded, the states are making every preparation for War[,] Next Friday is the day set apart for prayer and fasting by the President Buchanan, that God would save us from Civil War and blood guiltiness.” Historian Harry Stout observes that this “national fast day for peace and reconciliation proclaimed by President Buchanan for January 4, 1861, failed miserably” for Southern clergy and laypeople alike. However, Bethell did not question Buchanan’s right to establish that

“Stirring Appeals”
fast—she instead accepted his authority to do so and even appreciated the fast’s objective of preventing civil war.

The second factor predisposing elite Southern women’s appeal for fasting days was the group’s reverence for Jefferson Davis. Such admiration exceeded their former support for antebellum presidents and often lasted throughout the war. If, like Bethell, elite women appreciated national fasting days, their respect for Davis made them all the more likely to comply with Confederate fasts. As historian Drew Faust explains, those women believed that “institutions of power were extensions of divine government. God had delegated his power to white men.... In the view of many southern women, this created a continuum of power with God the highest master, a patriarch one level of command above Jefferson Davis.”

In many elite Southern women’s minds, Davis led a nation that defended their livelihoods from Union aggression and thus deserved their respect. Even after the Confederacy’s surrender, Gertrude Thomas, a plantation mistress from Georgia, wrote in May of 1865 that her “womanly sympathys [sic] go out for Jeff Davis and I do hope and pray that he will escape. Not to save my right arm would I betray him if I knew where he was and yet I was beginning to think him despotic.”

One month after the Confederacy’s defeat, Southern women like Thomas still refused to abandon Davis or their “womanly sympathys” for him.

Ultimately, both elite Southern women’s religiosity and support for Davis compelled them to attend fast-day church services. This obligation proved strong enough that when they could not meet it, some women voiced frustrations. During a national fast in May of 1862, Kate Carney, a daughter of a wealthy merchant who lived in Union-occupied Murfreesboro, Tennessee, wrote that it “was the Fast day appointed by Jeff Davis, and we kept it until dinner, though we had no service in our churches. It seems hard that we are not permitted to pray to God, when and how we want to.” In Carney’s opinion, the fault of the fast that Davis declared lay not in governmental overreach, but in that the Union occupation undermined her city’s ability to provide church services for her to attend. Carney felt exasperated with her inability to connect with God to the extent that she desired. She considered the fast a religious
privilege that should have provided her with church services and the sermons that ministers delivered therein. Carney’s testimony bolsters the notion that elite Southern women eagerly attended fast-day church services, which paved the way for their eventual belief in the utility of fasting for Confederate military success.

The Saliency of Sermons: Views on Fasting in the War’s First Year

However, simply attending these fast-day church services was not sufficient for the aforementioned development. Rather, elite Southern women’s evolving takeaways from the sermons at these services shaped the course of their views on wartime fasting.

In the war’s first year, Southern ministers used national fasts to proclaim that God blessed the Confederacy. Henry Tucker, a Baptist minister from Georgia, delivered a sermon to his state’s legislature on November 15, 1861, a date that “HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONFEDERATE STATES” designated a fasting day. Though he spoke directly to the Georgia state legislature, Tucker’s sermon typified how Confederate ministers from various denominations vindicated the Confederacy in the first year of the conflict. He recognized his audience in exclaiming, “My countrymen! It is right for us to resort to all the means of defence [sic] which Providence has placed within our reach. It is proper to call into action our best civil and military talent, to strain every energy to the utmost in supplying the material of war. As for that sublime faith which we have in the unconquerable valor of our troops, I admire it, I partake in it.” Tucker supported the Confederacy as a nation for which God provided. Though he did not claim the South invincible, his defense of the “unconquerable valor” of Confederate troops likely appealed to those Southerners who felt unsure about the Confederacy’s chances of victory.

Presbyterian minister Thomas Verner Moore’s fast-day sermon to a congregation in Richmond, Virginia on November 15, 1861 stressed similarly God’s favorable interpretation of the South. In his sermon, Moore claimed “that there has never been an army since the time of Cromwell, in which there was a more pervading “Stirring Appeals”
sense of the power of God than our own…. The resources of the mighty organization [the United States], whose stupendous gage of battle we fearlessly took up, were so vast in men, money, munitions of war, forts, fleets and armies, that unless God had been with us we must have been crushed.”

Moore considered Confederate military victories against the North’s superior numbers and supplies proof of God’s blessing of the South. The later publication of Tucker’s and Moore’s sermons, in addition to other sermons that replicated their espousals of Confederate righteousness, enabled their messages to reach a broader audience that included elite Southern women.

Fast-day sermons that echoed the pro-Confederacy sentiments of Tucker and Moore helped convince some elite women that God blessed the South in the war’s first year. Those women allowed Southern clergymen’s promises of God’s favor to augment their Confederate patriotism. In June of 1861, Judith McGuire, an Episcopal Confederate nurse who lived in Richmond and considered herself a “Lady of Virginia,” wrote: “Yesterday was set apart by the President as a day of prayer and fasting, and I trust that throughout the Confederacy the blessing of God was invoked upon the army and country. We went to church at Millwood and heard Bishop Meade. His sermon was full of wisdom and love…. He is full of enthusiasm and zeal for our cause.”

McGuire’s attendance of Meade’s sermon reinforced, if not created, her belief that God favored the South. She stated that Meade “says that if our ancestors had good reason for taking up arms in 1775, surely we had much better, for the oppression they suffered from the mother-country was not a tithe of the provocation we have received from the Government at Washington.”

Meade’s sermon buttressed McGuire’s belief in the South’s right to secede and mitigated the uncertainties she may have harbored regarding the Confederacy’s formation.

In defending the Confederacy and proposing God’s favor of the South, fast-day sermons assuaged the early-war anxieties that some Southern women possessed. Elite women who attended fast-day services described how Southern ministers’ enthusiasm for the CSA directed them away from fear and towards allegiance to the Confederacy. Margaret Crawford Adams, the wife of a former American Minister to Spain, lived in South Carolina at the start of
the war. She recorded the story of a female friend who, shortly after South Carolina seceded, “called to see me…. The only topic of conversation then was the prospect of war. My friend said: ‘I do not approve of this thing. What do I care for patriotism? My husband is my country. What is country to me if he be killed…. I will have poverty and my children will starve.’”

Yet from this early-war anxiety evolved a sense of righteousness of and due sacrifice for the Southern cause. That fasting day relieved Adams’s friend, who, “coming out of church, on a day appointed for fasting and prayer, where we had listened to one of the great Dr. Thornwell’s stirring appeals…said to me [Adams]: ‘I feel that I could do deeds of heroism.’”

Thornwell’s oration does not exist in print, but it likely echoed other early-war sermons’ assertions that God blessed the Confederacy. Adams recorded her recollections in 1903 and may have mistaken some of her story’s details. Despite this, her reference to how Thornwell’s message relieved her friend’s apprehensions reveals her long-held belief that fasting-day services calmed elite women’s early-war fears.

Elite women who attended fasting services in the war’s first year rarely discussed their desires for collective Southern adherence to national fasts. When they did, they seldom mentioned the tangible threats against which Southerners could defend themselves by unifying as a Christian populace. Instead, they made general statements that revealed only their personal preferences for religious unity. On a fasting day in April of 1862, Kate Cumming, an Episcopal Confederate nurse from Alabama, recorded that “I hope it [the public fast] will be duly observed. I believe that it is well kept in the army. There has been no show of keeping it in this hospital; the excuse is given – ‘too much to do.’” Cumming did not note that she believed Southern unity during the fast would cause future military success or relieve civilians’ hardships. Her frustrations reveal only her personal desire for Christian solidarity.

Like Cumming, Judith McGuire discovered in Confederate fasts chances to gather with other Southerners in support of the South and its Christian identity. On November 15, 1861, McGuire recorded that it “was fast-day – a national fast proclaimed by our President. I trust that every church in the Confederacy was well
filled with heart-worshippers…. This whole household was there [at church] – indeed, the whole neighborhood turned out.” McBride might have engaged in wishful thinking when positing that the entire South partook in church services. Her residence in the Confederate capital, where much of the population likely attended fast-day services, may have influenced her belief that the rest of South did the same. At no point did she claim, though, that Southern religious unity would benefit the Confederacy. These writings of Cumming, McBride, and others imply that elite Southern women had not yet constructed their belief in the military benefits of fasting during the war’s first year.

The Tide Turns: Views on Fasting in the War’s Second Half

However, by 1863, elite Southern women had suffered through enough wartime hardships to challenge their early-war opinions about God’s blessing of the South. Confederate military defeats at the Battles of Shiloh and Antietam, among others, undermined their previous faith in Providence. Personal suffering combined with those military losses to create religious difficulties for Southern women, a group that felt sure of God’s favor in the war’s first year. Historian Drew Faust explains that by 1863, the “ever mounting death toll worked its terrible effects on women’s sensibilities. By the middle years of the war almost no family remained exempt.” Faust contends that for “all God’s promises…it was hard to dispel doubt as months of war stretched into years and as the pain of individual bereavements mounted almost beyond endurance….” In Southern women’s opinions, ministers’ early-war promise that God blessed the South had not materialized.

Despite years of wartime hardships, Southern women’s religiosity inspired them to continue engaging in fasting days. Following the South’s deadliest defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg, elite women continued to note their adherence to national fasts. In August of 1863, Ellen Virginia Saunders, an Alabama woman with family members who served as officers in the Confederate military, noted a “proclamation by President Davis making this a day of
humiliation, fasting, and prayer. Ah, how many prayers are wafted to the throne of Light this day for fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and lovers! May God on high hear us!” Confederate military defeats did not undermine Saunders’s desire to engage in the national fast. Her religious convictions sustained her desire to join others and pray for her country and loved ones.

Even at the end of the war, a sense of Christian obligation compelled some elite women to comply with fasts. Eliza Frances Andrews, a Methodist who experienced the war’s end from a Georgia plantation, wrote that March 10, 1865 was a “day of public fasting and prayer for our poor country… After dinner the gentlemen proposed a row on the lake, but Mrs. Maxwell and I were the only ones that had fasted and we wouldn’t indulge in a frolic, and the others said they were afraid they might be drowned for their sins….” Though Andrews realized the dire state of her nation, her religiosity compelled her and Mrs. Maxwell to fast for their country.

Elite Southern women whose Christian convictions prompted them to attend fast-day services in the conflict’s second half heard messages that differed from early-war sermons. Southern ministers altered their early-war fasting sermons to offer religious explanations for previous Confederate military failures and Southern hardships. From 1863 to the war’s end, Southern ministers used fasting days to argue that God had punished the Confederacy for its people’s sins. Historian Drew Faust explains that in the opinions of Southern clergymen, “setbacks had to be seen as warnings that called upon southerners to cleanse themselves of wickedness and impiety, to transform themselves and their world to find God’s favor.” Episcopal minister Stephen Elliott explained the cause of Confederate hardships when he delivered a fast-day sermon to a Georgia congregation in August of 1863, one month after Confederate defeat at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. He stated:

In turning ourselves, therefore to God in fasting and prayer, let us truly humble ourselves and beseech Him to show us our own hearts and to convict us especially of those sins which are offensive to him and which have placed us in the wrong way[.] There should be great searchings [sic] of heart to-day [sic]. From

“Stirring Appeals”
the President of the Confederate States, who now occupies, for a time, the most responsible position in the world, to the humblest person who is involved in their destiny, each one of us should examine himself and find out, if possible, wherein he has offended God and turned away his face from us.\textsuperscript{30}

Elliott posited that every Confederate person had an obligation to discern what they did to incur God’s wrath on the South. All Southerners needed to improve their religious adherence to elicit God’s favor as the war continued; failing to do so would harm the entire Confederacy, not just those who refused to comply.

Post-1862 fast-day sermons convinced some elite women that God’s blessing of the South required collective adherence to Confederate fasts. Elite women’s compliance with fasting days no longer calmed their wartime fears. Rather, those women wished to ensure that other Southerners participated with them. Judith McGuire discussed her experiences during a Confederate fast in March of 1863: “To-day [sic] was set apart by the President as a day of fasting and prayer. Some of us went to Richmond and joined in the services at St. Paul's.”\textsuperscript{31} McGuire’s residence in Richmond put her near Davis, whom she wrote was “in church…. One of the ladies of the hospital, seeing this morning two rough-looking convalescent soldiers sitting by the stove, exhorted them to observe the day by prayer and fasting.”\textsuperscript{32} Though McGuire did not mention what ministers argued in their fast-day sermons, they likely mimicked Elliott’s emphasis on Southern religious unity.

That message inspired one of the nurses to undermine antebellum gender roles, which stressed feminine deference to men, and to rebuke soldiers who did not adhere to the fast. According to McGuire, one of those soldiers “seemed to have no objection to the praying, but could not see the ‘good of fasting,’ and doubted very much whether ‘Marse Jeff fasted all day himself—do you reckon he does?’ The lady laughingly told him that she would inquire and let them know, but she \textit{reckoned} that such was his habit.”\textsuperscript{33} The nurse’s desire to persuade the soldiers to observe the fast inspired her to confront Davis’s wife and ask her about her husband’s fast-day habits. McGuire contends that Mrs. Davis claimed “‘that Mr. Davis never eats on fast-day, and…as soon as he returns from church he

\textit{The James Blair Historical Review} (Spring 2018)
shuts himself up in his study, and is never interrupted during the day, except on public business.’ Of course, this was soon given as an example, not only to the two convalescents, but to the whole hospital.”

Unlike in the war’s first year, by 1863 McGuire no longer exclaimed that she trusted in God’s blessing. Nor did she imply that her adherence to the fast calmed her wartime fears. Instead, she recorded how she and other nurses took it upon themselves to ensure Confederate fast-day compliance. McGuire’s residence in the Confederacy’s capital and her proximity to the president may have influenced her favorable interpretation of Davis’s fast-day routine. Yet her reference to other nurses’ efforts to promote the fast reveals how a wider base of elite women emphasized Southern religious unity by 1863.

The belief that God’s blessing of the Confederacy required communal adherence to fasts drove some women to admonish Confederate officers for their irreligiosity. Kate Cumming wrote about a Confederate fast in August of 1863, one month after Southern defeat at the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. She stated that “Our chapel is finished. Mr. Green preached in it, and an excellent sermon he gave us; it was quite stirring and encouraging….” Though Mr. Green’s sermon does not exist in print, he gave it in the same month that Stephen Elliott delivered Ezra’s Dilemna, and thus likely stressed Confederate religious unity. That message resonated with Cumming, who on the same day recounted:

The morning services were pretty well attended by the privates; some of the officers instead of going played checkers. I had a conversation with one of them on the subject, and told him that the war would not close until men gave God the homage which he demanded. He did not agree with me; I asked him if he believed the Bible. He answered yes. I then asked him if he and the others had obeyed the commands in it, in seemingly grudging to give God that one day. I said nothing more, but was gratified to see him attend the afternoon service.

“Stirring Appeals”
Cumming did not assert that her attendance of Green’s sermon resolved her concerns regarding the war. Instead, that sermon seemed to convince her of Confederate religious unity’s importance. Unlike in the war’s first year, when she felt frustrated about a lack of adherence to a fast but did nothing to combat it, Cumming admonished a Confederate officer who did not meet her standard of religious commitment. Her desire for Confederate victory drove her to disregard propriety and ensure attendance at fast-day services.

After 1862, elite Southern women expressed vexation when they could not match other Southerners’ commitment to fasts. During a Confederate fasting day in August of 1864, Susan Bradford Eppes, a Methodist who lived on a Florida plantation, noted: “This is a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer. Our armies in Virginia and in the West have suffered reverses of late…. All who can, go to church; all the churches hold services…. Some stay all day, for they are fasting, but Father will not let us fast absolutely…. Father in Heaven, take care of our poor boys!” Eppes’s Florida residence and reference to recent Confederate military defeats reveals how those losses affected elite women throughout the South. That her mention of fast-day unity follows her note regarding military failures implies that she considered collective Southern adherence necessary to forestalling future losses. Eppes did not admonish other Confederates for their irreligiosity; after all, she witnessed uniform attendance of fast-day services. Instead, her statement that her father would not let her fast throughout the day reveals that she wished to emulate other Southerners’ religious commitment. Eppes did not state that fast-day services calmed her anxieties about the war or convinced her of God’s blessing. Rather, she likely believed that collective fasting could implore God to support the Confederacy’s future.

All of the above demonstrated that by 1863, elite women rarely mentioned that fasting days calmed their fears, and rather stressed collective fast-day adherence. However, Mary Jeffreys Bethell presents one potential exception to this argument. Bethell’s husband represented North Carolina in fighting for the Confederacy. She discussed her opinions of God after watching her husband leave home for the fight in November of 1864: “My husband started to the
army yesterday for Godsboro, he will get back to Court on a furlough…. I continue to look to God, I do trust in him, but I am tempted and tried [sic].” Bethell’s husband’s departure into a war that she knew caused suffering made her question the deity that allowed that to happen. Yet in that same entry Bethell went on to write that “I went to Union today to prayer meeting, it was public fast day. We had a profitable time at Church, good deal of feeling. Read the Bible and exhorted, we sung several hymns. I have received comfort this evening my trouble is gone, my soul is happy, hallelujah. I will praise the Lord forever, he has answered me.” Bethell did not consider Southern religious unity during the fast necessary for relieving her anxieties. Despite this, her attendance of a fast-day prayer meeting, and not a sermon, reveals that she likely did not hear Southern ministers’ appeals for religious unity. Had she attended a sermon, she may have joined her contemporaries in stressing collective Southern engagement with national fasts.

Conclusion

Given their religious commitment in the antebellum era, it should not surprise anyone that elite Southern women adhered to Confederate fasts throughout the Civil War. Nor does it appear strange that post-1862 fasting sermons inspired them to wish for collective Southern compliance with those fasts. But given the nuance of Southern fasting days in the conflict’s historical period, it initially seems peculiar that elite Confederate women supported them so strenuously. As historian Harry Stout explains, “The ascendance of the public fast in the Confederacy…is truly remarkable. Through all of American history up to 1860, public fasts had been quintessentially Northern and ‘Puritan.’ Yet, when secession came to war, the Confederacy would employ the public fast more frequently than the North.” In this sense, the Civil War might have served as a watershed moment in American religious history—a period during which Southern Christian adherence surpassed Northern religiosity.

But if this were the case for the entire Southern populace, it would undermine the fact that elite Southern women rarely—if
ever—challenged or found odd those days of fasting. Such a view forgets that those women exited the antebellum era with religious dispositions that inclined them to emphasize public fasts throughout the war. With these thoughts in mind, the Civil War served as a watershed moment in Southern American religious history only in the sense that CSA officials acted in ways that reaffirmed their civilians’ Christianity and allowed the Confederate government to approach those civilians’ levels of religious conviction. One of the principal ways in which that government drew closer to the religiosity of its civilians—and especially that of its female civilians—was through its enactment of national fasts.

Notes

1 This essay considers Southern women “elite” if they were Caucasian and their familial connections, wartime occupations, or residences (e.g., plantations) characterized placement in higher economic classes.

2 Information regarding women’s residences and denominations accompany their introductions to the essay. If an elite woman’s first mention does not include reference to her denomination, then no information about that denomination could be found.

3 This essay compares the first year of the war—from April, 1861 to April, 1862—with the period between January of 1863 and the Confederacy’s surrender in April of 1865. January of 1863 did not mark a turning point in the war that transformed elite women’s opinions of national fasts. Rather, it serves as a useful point by which Confederate women had experienced enough military failures and wartime hardships to question God’s blessing of the South.

4 Stephanie McCurry, Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 141.


7 Ibid.


12 Ibid.


15 On elements common to most Confederate fast-day sermons from the war’s first year, see James Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 260-264.


17 Ibid.


20 Ibid.


22 Ibid.


26 Ibid.


“Stirring Appeals”

Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 182.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 48.
Overseers’ Quest for Control in the WPA Slave Narratives

Delia Karamouzis

Introduction

William Scarborough, a notable historian of the American South, claims that “no figure occupied a position of greater importance in the managerial hierarchy of the southern plantation system than did the overseer.”¹ Scarborough challenges the myth of the overseer as “an uncouth, uneducated, dissolute, inept slave driver” and instead argues that these descriptions were largely a construct of the members of the planter class. In “Plantation Overseers and Their World: The Stereotype, Life and Image,” Robert Wayne Webber substantiates Scarborough’s claim, asserting that “When we think of overseers today, we visualize an evil white man with a whip. As this image would lead us to believe, overseers are pictured as violent, amoral, brutal, cruel and uncaring…and this cruelty has overshadowed a true understanding of overseers and they have become a caricature of base ignorance and cruelty.”² This paper will seek to refute the claims of both Scarborough and Webber through an examination of overseers as presented in the Works Progress Administration Slave Narratives.³ It will argue that this “caricature” of overseers as “violent, amoral, brutal, cruel and uncaring” is largely merited, as overseers sought to assert physical, psychological, and sexual control over slaves through the use of both ritual and unpredictable violence.⁴

This essay examines the WPA Narratives collected by the Federal Writer’s Project of former slaves.⁵ These sources contain interviews from over two thousand former slaves in seventeen states, describing their time in bondage. Scholars readily

“Overseers’ Quest”
acknowledge that these interviews are flawed. While over two thousand slaves were interviewed, these individuals were not necessarily representative. Most interviewees were urban, male house slaves, and samples of former slaves were disproportionately high in some states compared to others. Rural residents and enslaved field workers remain largely underrepresented in the interviews, though both skilled and unskilled workers enjoyed representation.

The ages of the ex-slaves also raise questions about the validity of their testimonies, as more than two-thirds of the interviewees were over eighty years old at the time of their interviews. Many scholars debate the effects of failing memory on the descriptions of slavery provided in the interviews, as historical recollections are often subjective in nature. Historians also examine the extent to which the interviewees truly experienced the harsh realities of slavery as children, or whether their experiences of the peculiar institution were colored by their youth. Similarly, other scholars inquire whether the long lifespans of the former slaves interviewed indicate that they were treated better, or experienced fewer punishments than those of a typical slave.

The problem of age and memory is particularly relevant to the discussion of overseers. Former slaves’ perception of overseers is largely correlated to the degree to which they were directly exposed to them. Many former slaves interviewed were children during the time of slavery, thus much of what they know about overseers may have been influenced by the experiences and comments of their parents who worked under overseers in the fields. The brutality of overseers differed by plantation and by region especially, with a tendency towards more severe violence in the Deep South—specifically on rice plantations. Finally, particular attention must be paid to the fact that a sizable number of the slaves interviewed were house slaves, as this significantly affected their interactions and perceptions of the overseer.

Despite the obvious flaws of these sources, one cannot ignore the historical value in the “candor” these interviews provide. These narratives offer unprecedented access into the stories of slavery from the mouths of those who experienced and
witnessed the peculiar institution firsthand, and further serve as indispensable resources in capturing the expansiveness of the enslaved experience. In spite of the risks they faced, numerous slaves felt compelled to share their experiences so future generations would know the realities of slavery—even if some of their messages were rather indirect. Interviewers often adopted patronizing, condescending and paternalistic tones in their interviews, due to the climate of race relations that existed during the Great Depression. Escott notes that as a result of these racial power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees, former slaves often turned to more nuanced methods of communication to convey substantive descriptions or realities of their experience. Despite the strong biases and attitudes of paternalism and white supremacy that color many of the interviews, the shrewd ability by which the former slaves communicated provides readers with a windfall of valuable information that allows us to better understand the nature of the “peculiar institution” and, more specifically, comprehend the roles of overseers and the dynamics that existed between the enslaved and their overseers on the plantation.

**Plantation Overseers: Their Duties and Responsibilities**

To provide some historical context on the subject at hand, an overview of overseers’ obligations would prove beneficial. Overseers had wide-ranging duties and responsibilities on the plantation, typically specified in written contracts with masters. In *Down By the Riverside*, Charles Joyner wrote that one master included stipulations into his overseer’s contract, specifying that his performance “would be judged first and foremost by the general well being of the negroes, their cleanly appearance, respectful manners, active and vigorous obedience, their completion of tasks well and early, the small amount of punishment; the excess of births over deaths; the small number of people in the hospital, and the health of children.” Joyner noted, however, that “overseers varied in their effectiveness in carrying out the planters’ desires.” Joyner also cautions that masters’ primary goals—absolutely clear even if unstated—were to make
a profit, thus any admonitions that overseers take good care of the enslaved were secondary concerns.

As recollected in the narratives, awakening the slaves each day to begin work represented one of the main duties of overseers. Reverend Silas Jackson recalled arising each morning before sunrise to the sound of the overseer’s horn.\textsuperscript{13} Alec Pope also described waking up each morning at four o’clock at the command of his overseer.\textsuperscript{14} “Just like yesterday – I hear the old overseer making round of the cabins every day at four, and I means in the morning too, when the night sleep is the best, and folkeses tumbling out of the door getting ready for the fields,” added Daniel William Lucas.\textsuperscript{15} After slaves arose each morning, overseers urgently directed them to the fields, often with no time to tend to their families or eat before their labor began. “All de slaves dat was field hands, dey had to work mighty hard. De overseer, he pretty rough sometimes. He tell em what time to get up en sound de horn for dat time. Had to go to work fore daybreak en if dey didn’ be dere on time en work like dey ought to, de overseer sho whip dem,” described Charlie Grant.\textsuperscript{16} “The Negro overseer would wake up the slaves and have them in the field before they could see how to work each morning,” Robert Grinstead testified, “and as they would go to work so soon their breakfast was carried to the field to them.”\textsuperscript{17}

One cannot understate the deliberate and prominent inclusion of being awoken by the overseer each morning. The narratives’ common mentioning of this seemingly trivial fact after several decades, unprompted by the interviewer, deserves attention as it conveys the psychological authority that overseers maintained over slaves. Slaves started and concluded each day at the command of the overseer, and evidently resented the psychological governance of overseers over their period of rest—one of the most vulnerable shared experiences of human beings.

Once the slaves began their labor, the overseer harbored responsibility for seeing that the slaves worked efficiently. George Womble observed, “An overseer was hired by the master to see that the work was done properly.”\textsuperscript{18} The overseer was also in charge of dismissing slaves once their work had been completed and inspected, the latter of which consisted of
checking their rows or counting the number of crops picked. Slaves faced the constant threat of violence from overseers, and Mary James described that this threat was realized if overseers believed the slaves were working at an insufficient pace.19 “De overseer dat we had was right mean to us when we didn’ work our rows as fas’ as de others, an’ sometime he whup us, wimmen an’all,” added Clare C. Young.20

Another duty of the overseer was handling the passes that enabled slaves to travel between plantations. Reverend Silas Jackson explained, “When we could get work, or work on someone else’s place, we got a pass from the overseer to go off the plantation but had to be back by nine o’clock on Saturday night or when cabin inspection was made [by the overseer].”21 Oftentimes, overseers also served as the principal means of medical care for slaves. Bert Mayfield stated, “At that time there were few doctors and when the slaves would get hurt or sick, they were usually looked after by the master or by their overseer.”22 However, utilizing the services of doctors proved rare since masters viewed doctors as inconvenient and expensive.

The overseer’s duties extended beyond the mere labor of the slaves. Overseers usually supervised the personal and spiritual lives of the slaves as well, largely as a means of demonstrating ubiquitous psychological control. Anthony Dawson revealed, “The overlooker made everybody clean up and wash de children up [On Sundays].”23 The overseer even oversaw the worship of the slaves; Reverend Silas Jackson recalled, “On Sunday the slaves who wanted to worship would gather at one of the large cabins with one of the overseers and have their church. After which the overseer would talk. When communion was given the overseer was paid for staying there with half the collection taken up, some time he would get 25 cents.”24 Not only did overseers attempt to control the labor of the enslaved, but they also tried to exert psychological control over the precious personal time that slaves had away from labor.

Lastly, overseers’ duties included other responsibilities specified by masters, which varied from plantation to plantation. Mary James noted, “In the quarters we had furniture made by the overseer and the colored carpenters; they would make the tables,

“Overseers’ Quest”
benches and beds for everybody.”  

25 Alexander Scaife recalled, “Overseers I recollects was, Mr. Sam Hughes, Mr. Tom Baldwin, and Mr. Whitfield Davis. Mr. Baldwin was de best to me. He had a still-house out in a field whar liquor was made. I tote it fer him. We made good corn liquor.”  

26 Overseers often also had connections to patrollers, Reverend Silas Jackson observed, and were always on the lookout for runaway slaves from other plantations, in the hopes of reaping rewards for their capture.  

27 When asked about the duties of overseers, Andy Marion replied, “All de overseer done was to wake us up, see to feeding stock, and act biggity.”  

28 In short, overseers possessed a great number of responsibilities from which they derived authority to subjugate their slaves, a reality which will be further expanded upon throughout the paper.

**Plantation Overseers: Who Were They?**

Besides understanding their duties—and to better comprehend their motivations—one should recognize exactly who overseers were. The narratives routinely describe overseers as “poor men.” Perry Lewis affirmed that the majority of poor white men in Maryland served as overseers.  

29 “Our overseer was a poor man,” detailed Harriet Robinson, “He was paid to be head of punishment.”  

30 As William Wiethoff observed, both whites and blacks served as overseers.  

31 White overseers were typically poor males who sought to collect both income and experience in running a plantation, with the aim of one day becoming a master. White overseers served as the authority figure on the plantation in the absence of the master, as clarified by Mrs. M.S. Fayman who stated, “[The plantation] contained 8000 acres, of which more than 6000 acres were under cultivation, and having about 350 colored slaves and 5 or 6 overseers all of who were white. The overseers were the overlords of the manor; as Haynes [her Master] dealt extensively in tobacco and trading in slaves, he was away from the plantation nearly all the time.”  

32 Perceptions of white overseers varied from slave to slave. A common freedmen’s epitaph for overseers was “poor white trash.” Slaves favored this term as it offered them an opportunity
to regain some of the control and agency that overseers so insatiably demanded. The term “poor white trash,” however, was not a socioeconomic evaluation of overseers but rather a moral, social, and ethical evaluation. White overseers enjoyed special economic privileges by virtue of their race and status as an overseer, such as sharing a house with the master on the plantation. Stephen McCray explained, “Master had a brick house for hisself and the overseer. They was the only ones on the place.”

When asked about her overseer, Emma Howard responded, “How did we feel ‘bout a white man who would be over-looker? We called him ‘po white trash, He wasn’t thought much of by anybody.” Similarly, Hal Huston attested, “All of us niggers called all the whites ‘poor white trash.’ The overseer was nothing but poor white trash and the meanest man that ever walked on earth.” In an interview with Ben Horry of South Carolina, the interviewer wrote, “On Waccamaw – and same true of all south as all know – white overseers worst kind of ‘white trash’ – respected less by negroes than by whites.”

Some slaves pointed to the racial divide that existed between white overseers and their slaves as the source of hatred and tension. Hannah McFarland observed, “The overseer was sho’ nothing but poor white trash, the kind who didn’t like niggers and dey still don’t, old devils. Don’t let ‘em fool you, dey don’t lak a nigger a’tall.” Bert Luster echoed McFarland’s sentiments and reported, “We didn’t have no mean overseer. Master Astern and his son jest told us niggers what to do and we did it, but 50 miles away dem niggers had a mean overseer and dey called him ‘poor white trash,’ ‘old whooser,’ and sometime ‘old red neck,’ and he sho’ would beat ‘em turrible iffens dey didn’t do jest like he wanted ‘em to.”

Stephen McCray reiterated the prevailing attitude toward white overseers when he declared, “He wasn’t nothing but white trash. Nothing else in the world but that.” One ex-slave named Janie Gallman described playing with the children of the white overseer as a child, often jumping rope with them and spending the night in their house when the overseer left the plantation. But despite her intimate relations with the family of the overseer, even Gallman referred to the family’s patriarch as the ‘poor white trash.’
as “poor white trash,” demonstrating the prevalence of this ubiquitous sentiment towards white overseers.\textsuperscript{40}

White overseers were occasionally relatives of the master, usually sons or nephews. Through the employment of relatives, masters could retain close ties to their overseers and ensure transparency and supervision. Ophelia Whitley recalled, “His [master] son Billy wuz de overseer an’ he wuz good ter git along wid, but he shore made dem darkies wuck.”\textsuperscript{41} However, some slaves regarded white overseers as inferior to their black counterparts, as illustrated by Andy Marion who specified, “Master had an overseer twice. They was poor white trash, not as good as de niggers.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus, the narratives reveal that slaves commonly regarded white overseers unfavorably, and slaves’ frequent reference to “poor white trash” adequately captured their disdain for the white men who would take these violent jobs.

Besides lower class white men, black male slaves also served as overseers on the plantation. Blacks served in lieu of white overseers on some plantations at the desire of the master, and they existed alongside and subservient to their white counterparts. “Dey had Niggers over de hoers an’ white mens over de plow han’s,” remarked Anna Baker.\textsuperscript{43} Fred Brown remembered having both a white and black overseer: “Massa have overseer and overlooker. De overseer am in charge of wo’k and de overlooker am in charge of de cullud women.”\textsuperscript{44} Robert Grinstead similarly recalled, “There was one Negro man slave who decided to not work after Master went to the War and the white overseer was fired and the Negro overseer was acting as an overseer.”\textsuperscript{45} White overseers viewed black overseers as a threat to their position and their wages, William Wiethoff argues.\textsuperscript{46} Unlike whites, black overseers still lived in their slave quarters on the “street” where slaves resided. Black overseers “could hardly aspire to be planters” but their status as an overseer afforded them certain privileges, such as better living conditions.\textsuperscript{47} Some masters exhibited preferences in the race of their overseers, as supported by Adele Frost who noted, “My master was kind to his slaves an’ his overseer was all Negroes.”\textsuperscript{48} Lizzie Farmer also testified, “My grandpappy was Master Booker’s overseer. He wouldn’t have a white man over his niggers.”\textsuperscript{49} However, other
masters merely used black overseers in the absence of available whites. Robert Grinstead recalled that when the Civil War broke out his master left the plantation in charge of the white overseer and his two sisters. Yet, Grinstead added that “as the overseers were hard for them to get along with they were oftener without an overseer as with one, and therefore they used one of the Negroes as overseer for most of the time.”

Designations proved very important to the discussion of white and black overseers. According to Anthony Dawson, “We called a white man boss the ‘overseer,’ but a nigger was an over-looker.” Emma Howard confirmed this distinction and stated, “Jake was de over-looker. He was a great, big cullud man.” Some slaves who conducted the duties of overseers were not afforded the title of overseer. Annie Young Henson testified: “We never had any overseers on the plantation, we had an old colored man by the name of Peter Taylor. His orders were law, if you wanted to please Mistress and Master, obey old Peter.”

Similar to white overseers, black overseers passed the position of the overseer down among families. “My father was the colored overseer,” recalled Richard Macks, “He had charge of the entire population and continued until he was too old to work, then mother’s brother took it over, his name was Caleb.” Lou Smith also explained, “Old Master was his own overseer, but my daddy was the overlooker. He was purty hard on them [the slaves] too, as they had to work just like they never got tired.” Anthony Dawson testified, “One of them [overseers] was my pappy’s brother. His name was John, and he was my master’s overlooker. John could read and write and figger, and old Master didn’t have no white overseer.”

Slaves harbored different perceptions of the violence of white overseers and black overseers. Some found white overseers more violent, while others found black overseers tougher in inflicting punishments. William Curtis declared, “Old Master was good to all of his slaves but his overseers had order to make ‘em work…Colored overseers was worse to whip than white ones, but Master allus said, ‘Hadn’t you all rather have a nigger overseer than a white one? I don’t want no white man over my niggers.” In contrast, Ben Horry argued that in his experience, white

“Overseers’ Quest”
overseers inflicted more brutal punishments as a method of self-preservation for their own livelihood, while black overseers showed more mercy. Horry compared his experience with both black and white overseers when he stated, “Negro over seer – just fresh out of Africa TURNED LOOSE. White obersheer a little different for one reason! White obersheer want to hold his job… Nigger obersheer don’t care too much. He know he going to stay on plantation anyhow.”

However, the interviewer noted at the end of Horry’s interview his statement that the “cruel negro overseer was shot down after Freedom – blood still on the ground because he led Yankees to where silver, etc., was buried.” It is true that “white overseers, according to the Slave Narratives, tended to be harsher and stricter than black overseers,” but as demonstrated above this varied from plantation to plantation.

The Violence of Plantation Overseers

In spite of these racial differences, the principle characteristic underlying both black and white overseers was their routine use of ritual and predictable violence. This practice asserted both physical and psychological control over the enslaved. “Massa would only whup a slave fer two things,” recounted Emma Howard, “One thing was if things warn’t done up jes’ right at hog killin’ time, and de other was iffen a nigger warn’t clean when ‘ported for work on Monday mornin’s. Ol’ Massa didn’t do de whuppin’ hisse’f. Jake [overseer] did it, but Massa sat dar on his horse to see dat only a certain number of licks was given.” Daniel William Lucas recalled the psychological burden of violence he faced at the hands of his overseer during his work in the field: “The old sun’s a-grinning down like he was saying: ‘work, niggers, work!’ And the overseer is saying the same thing, only we pays more attention to him ‘cause of the whip he shakes around when the going gets kinder slow down the row.” Richard Macks similarly reflected on his labor on a large tobacco plantation in Southern Maryland: “Men, women and children had to work hard to produce the required crops. The slaves did the work and they were driven at full speed.
sometimes by the owners and others by both owner and overseers.”

According to what the former slaves told their WPA interviewers, working too slowly represented one of the most common reasons overseers inflicted violence. Mary James denounced the capriciousness of the work pace—the white men’s “fancy”—when she reported: “The overseer lived on the farm. He would whip men and women and children if he thought they were not working fast… The slaves were whipped for not working fast or anything that suited the fancy of the master or the overseer.”

Reverend Silas Jackson remembered, “The slaves were driven at top speed and whipped at the snap of a finger, by the overseers, we had four overseers on the farm all hired white men. I have seen men beaten until they dropped in their tracks or knocked over by clubs, women stripped won to their waist and cowhided.”

Jackson, like James, highlighted that whipping was not scientifically administered for a set pace by using the phrase “at the snap of a finger.” Robert Grinstead recalled an ingenious and sadistic method one overseer used to get a young slave to work faster:

“One morning the breakfast was taken to the field and the slaves were hoeing cotton and among them a lad about 15 years of age who could not hoe as fast as the older slaves and the breakfast was sat at the end of the rows and as they would hoe out to the end they would eat, and if you would be late hoeing to the end the first to go to the end would began eating and eat everything. So, this 15 year old lad in order to get out to eat before everything was gone did no hoe his row good and the overseer, who was white at this time, whipped him so severely that he could not eat nor work that day.”

Overseers further abused slaves for taking breaks. “Old Marster got kilt in de last year of de war, and Miss Margaret dat was our Mistress, run de place wid overseers dat would thrash you for all sorts of things,” recalled Mack Taylor. “If they ketch you leanin’ on your hoe handle, they’d beat you; step out of your task a minute or speak to a girl, they’d beat you. Oh, it was hell when de overseers was around and de mistress nor none of de young

“Overseers’ Quest”
marsters was dere to protect you.” 68 Similarly, Sarah Ross recounted how “The slaves arose with the sun to begin their tasks in the fields and worked until dusk. They were beaten by the overseer if they dared to rest themselves.” 69 Hal Huston confirmed others’ testimony: “The overseer’s name was Charlie Clark. One day he whipped a man until he was bloody as a pig ‘cause he went to the mill and stayed too long.”70

Overseers inflicted particularly brutal punishments for slaves who tried running away. Hector Godbold described, “Never couldn’ go from one plantation to de other widout dey had a ticket wid em. I see Sam Watson catch many of dem dat had run way en buff en gag em.”71 Overseers usually sent bloodhounds into the woods and surrounding plantations to catch runaway slaves. Louisa Gause observed, “Some of de time, when de colored people wouldn’ do what dey had been put to do, dey would hide in de woods en stay dere till de overseer come after dem. Oh, dey would find dem wid de nigger dog. When de overseer would find out dey had run away, he would send de nigger dog to hunt dem.”72 Mrs. M.S. Fayman also recalled, “One of the overseers had a pack of 6 or 8 trained bloodhounds which were used to trace escaping slaves.”73

The bloodhounds, like the overseers they operated under, served as not only a physical threat to the slaves, but also a psychological one. George G. King offered an example of ritual physical punishment that was an effort to assert psychological control: “The overseer would come every morning with the same question: ‘Will you niggers promise not to run-away no more?...One at a time the overseer would lead them from jail to cut them with powerful blows from the lash, then drag them back to be chained until the next day when more lickings were given ‘cause they wouldn’t promise.”74 Thus, overseers issued physical punishments for slaves that attempted to run away, but also used psychological threats, such as the use of bloodhounds, as a means of retaining control.

Yet another means of overseer’s physical control was sexual violence. Anna Baker recalled that her mother fled the plantation when Anna was a child, and stated that she was too young to know the reasons why her mother left. She noted that years later:
“She tol’ me when she come after us, after de war was over, all ‘bout why she had to run away: It was on ‘count o’ de Nigger overseers. Dey kep’ a-tryin’ to mess ‘roun’ wid her an’ she wouldn’ have nothin’ to do wid ‘em. One time while she was in de fiel’ de overseer asked her to go over to de woods wid him an’ she said, ‘All right, I’ll go find a nice place an’ wait.’ She jus’ kep’ a-goin. She swum de river an’ run away. She slipped back onet or twict at night to see us, but dat was all.”  75

Finally, overseers exacted violence on slaves for their failure to complete an adequate amount of work under the “task system,” which assigned a specific duty or quota for slaves each day. “On the farm the slaves were assigned a task to do each day,” explained Mrs. M.S. Fayman, “and in the event it was not finished they were severely whipped.”  76 James Calhart James acknowledged, “We had white overseers on the plantation, they worked hard producing rice on a very large scale, late and early. I know they were severely punished, especially for not producing the amount or work assigned them or for things that the overseers thought they should be punished for.”  77 Louisa Gause similarly explained, “De overseer, he would give you a task to do en you had to do it, too, if you never been want your neck broke. Yes, mam, de overseer would stock you down en whip you wid a buggy whip.”  78 George Womble recalled that slaves received lashes for being “careless” in their work and were often forced to take their clothes off in the field for a cruel beating. Womble further confirmed that slaves producing cotton, who used the “gang system” as opposed to the task system, also experienced abuse for not producing enough; slaves were whipped when they failed to “pick the required three-hundred pounds of cotton daily.”  79 Alec Pope echoed Womble and in talking about his overseers stated, “Dey brushed us if we lagged in de field or cut up de cotton. Dey could allus find some fault wid us.”  80

Many overseers expressed violent tendencies, but others proved downright sadistic. As noted previously, unpredictable and arbitrary violence enabled overseers to assert not just physical but also psychological control over the slaves. In their infliction of sadistic, violent punishment, overseers sought to deprive slaves
of any agency, as slaves possessed no way of mentally preparing for the malicious whims of their overseers. The degree of violence depended on the capricious mood of the overseer, which was often heightened by the presence of alcohol. Overseers commonly treated the lashes they inflicted on slaves with salt, pepper, and vinegar to prolong and aggravate the pain. Mrs. John Barclay attested, “[The overseer] would whip us ‘till we was raw and then put pepper and salt in de sores. If he thought we was too slow in doin’ anything he would kick us off de groun’ and churn us up and down.”81 Barclay’s overseer was creative in his cruelty: “Our punishment depended on de mood of de overseer…De over-seer would git some coarse cotton cloth to make our work clothes out of and den he would make dem so narrow we couldn’t hardly walk.”82

Annie Young recalled another creative albeit brutal punishment on a neighboring plantation: “Dey didn’t whip our folks much, but one day I saw a overseer on another place. He staked a man down with two forked sticks ‘cross his wrist nailed in de ground and beat him half to death with a hand saw ‘til it drawed blisters. Den he mopped his back wid vinegar, salt and pepper. Sometimes dey’d drop dat hot rosin from pine knots on dose blisters.”83 Mary James admitted, “Old Silas Randolph [Master] was a mean man to his slaves especially when drunk. He and the overseer would always be together, each of whom carried a whip and upon the least provocation would whip his slaves.”84

Overseers imposed whimsical violence to further assert their own dominance over the other slaves on the plantation. Charlie Grant described an instance in which his overseer “Tie de slaves clear de ground by dey thumbs wid nigger cord en make dem tiptoe en draw it tight as could be. Pull clothes off dem fore dey tie dem up. Dey didn’t care nothin bout it. Let everybody look on at it.”85 Several slaves went so far as to refer to their overseers as the devil due to their frequent, sadistic punishment. George G. King stated, “He was born on two-hundred acres of Hell, but the whitefolks called it Samuel Roll’s plantation…kinder small for a plantation, but plenty room for that devil overseer to lay on the lash.”86 When Charley Williams was asked about the afterlife in his interview, he noted: “I never had no children, and it look lak
my wife going outlive me, so my mainest hope when I goes on is seeing Mammy and Pappy and old Master. Old overseer, I speck, was too devilish mean to be thar!"87

Overseers carried out violence with the tools most readily available on the plantation and certain to inflict the most pain. Among the most popular of these instruments were the cat o’ nine tails. The cat o’nine tails, commonly referred to as the “nine,” were multi-tailed, knotted masses of leather that varied in length. Overseers used them to brutally slash the skin of their victims. “We all hated what they called the ‘nine ninety-nine,’ usually a flogging until fell over unconscious or begged for mercy,” Dennis Simms reported.88 Hector Godbold also remembered the use of the cat o’nine tails: “Sam Watson was a rough old overseer... Sam Watson come dere and make dat fellow lay down on a plank in da fence jam en he take dat cat o’nine tail he have tie round his waist en strike John 75 times. De blood run down off his just like you see a stream run in dat woods.”89 Katie Rowe’s overseer similarly utilized the cat o’nine tails: “When he go to whip a nigger he make him to strip to de waist, and he take a cat-o-nine tails and bring de blisters, and den bust de blisters wid a wide strap of leather fastened to a stick handle. I seen de blood running out’n many a back, all de way from de neck to de waist!”90

When issuing whippings, overseers almost always forced slaves, men and women alike, to strip off their clothing. Not only did this tactic exact a more excruciating physical pain, but it also demeaned the slaves in front of their peers—another form of psychological control. Alec Pope recalled, “Marster brushed us sometime, but de overseer most gen’ally done it. I ‘members dey used to make ‘omans pull up deir skirts and brushed ‘em wid a horse whup or a hickory.”91 Richard Macks described one slave on his plantation that refused to allow his owner to whip him. Macks continued, “the overseer and several others overpowered the slave, tied him, put him across a hogshead and whipped him severely for three mornings in succession.”92 This example—along with many others—details the combination of both unpredictable and ritual punishment to both physically and psychologically subjugate rebellious slaves and re-assert control.

“Overseers’ Quest” 37
Master and Mistress Resistance to Overseer Violence

The extreme, sadistic violence carried out by overseers often stood in direct conflict with the masters’ objectification of the enslaved. To prevent the damage of their investment, many masters verbally condemned overseers’ brute violence. Overseers were acutely aware of the admonitions of their masters, and so they threatened slaves with death to prevent them from reporting such violence. Clare C. Young described the death of her cousin at the hands of an overseer and recalled, “I heard tell one time, tho’, of de hired man (he was a nigger) an’ de oberseer whuppin’ one of my cousins ‘til she bled; she was jes’ sebenteen years old an’ was in de fambly way fer de fust time, an’ couldn’ work as hard as de rest. Nex’ mawnin’ afte’ dat she died. De hired man tol’ de rest if dey said anything ‘bout it to de marster, he’d beat dem to death, too, so every’body kep’ quiet an’ quiet an’ de marster neber knowed.”

Minnie Fulkes told a chilling story worth quoting in full:

Honey, I don’t’ like to talk ‘bout dem times, ‘cause my mother did suffer misert. You know dar wus an’ overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn with a rope aroun’ her arms up over he heard, while she stood on a block. Soon as dey got her tied, dis block was moved an’ her feet dangled, yo’ know couldn’t tech de flo’. Dis ol’ man, now, would start beatin’ her nekkid ‘til the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an’ seed th’ whelps an’ scars for my own self wid dese here two eyes. After dey had beat my muma all dey wanted another overseer. Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo. Well honey dis man would bathe her in salt and water. Don’t you kno’ dem places wuz a hurtin’. Um, um. I asked mother, what she done fer ‘en to beat and do her so? She said, ‘nothin’, tother than she refused to be wife to dis man. An’ muma say, if he didn’t treat her dis way a dozen times, it wasn’t nary one. Mind you, now muma’s marster didn’t know dis wus going on. You now, if slaves would tell, why dem overseers would kill ‘em.

Fulkes’s mother refused to marry a man not of her choice, and thus paid the price for her defiance. Her mother’s failure to reveal...
this severe violence to her master illustrates the broader psychological fear overseers instilled in the enslaved.

To assuage masters’ concerns, overseers sometimes justified their violence against slaves when it stemmed from disobedience to masters’ commands. Dennis Simms explained: “We had to toe the mark or be flogged with a rawhide whip, and almost every day there was from two to ten thrashings given on the plantations to disobedient Negro slaves. When we behaved we were not whipped, but the overseer kept a pretty close eye on us. We stuck pretty close to the cabins after dark, for if we were caught roaming about we would be unmercifully whipped.”

Charley Williams described the unpredictable punishments issued by his overseer for disobedience:

“Our overseer was Mr. Simmons, and he was mighty smart and had a lot of patience, but he wouldn’t take no talk nor foolishness. He didn’t whup nobody very often, but he only had to whup ‘em jest one time! He never did whup a nigger at de time the nigger done something, but he would wait till evening and have old Master come and watch him do it. He never whupped very hard ‘cept when he had told a nigger something and promised a whupping next time and the nigger done it again. Then that nigger got what he had been hearing ‘bout!”

Lucy McCullough detailed a severe whipping she received from her overseer as a child on her Master Ned’s plantation for playing games in the woods with the other slave children. “The woods” are often mentioned in connection with disobedience and violence in the narratives. Numerous plantations occupied land next to rural woods, so slaves typically used this setting as a place of refuge from the violence and labor of the plantation.

But while overseers abused slaves for failing to follow their masters’ commands, sometimes overseers were the ones disregarding the masters’ wishes. For example, while many masters directed their overseers to teach their slaves the reason for their punishment, some overseers whipped slaves for no reason at all. Katie Rowe recalled, “Old man Saunders was de hardest overseer of anybody. He would git mad and give a whipping some time and de slave wouldn’t even know what it was

“Our overseer was Mr. Simmons, and he was mighty smart and had a lot of patience, but he wouldn’t take no talk nor foolishness. He didn’t whup nobody very often, but he only had to whup ‘em jest one time! He never did whup a nigger at de time the nigger done something, but he would wait till evening and have old Master come and watch him do it. He never whupped very hard ‘cept when he had told a nigger something and promised a whupping next time and the nigger done it again. Then that nigger got what he had been hearing ‘bout!”

Lucy McCullough detailed a severe whipping she received from her overseer as a child on her Master Ned’s plantation for playing games in the woods with the other slave children. “The woods” are often mentioned in connection with disobedience and violence in the narratives. Numerous plantations occupied land next to rural woods, so slaves typically used this setting as a place of refuge from the violence and labor of the plantation.

But while overseers abused slaves for failing to follow their masters’ commands, sometimes overseers were the ones disregarding the masters’ wishes. For example, while many masters directed their overseers to teach their slaves the reason for their punishment, some overseers whipped slaves for no reason at all. Katie Rowe recalled, “Old man Saunders was de hardest overseer of anybody. He would git mad and give a whipping some time and de slave wouldn’t even know what it was

“Our overseer was Mr. Simmons, and he was mighty smart and had a lot of patience, but he wouldn’t take no talk nor foolishness. He didn’t whup nobody very often, but he only had to whup ‘em jest one time! He never did whup a nigger at de time the nigger done something, but he would wait till evening and have old Master come and watch him do it. He never whupped very hard ‘cept when he had told a nigger something and promised a whupping next time and the nigger done it again. Then that nigger got what he had been hearing ‘bout!”
about.” R.S. Taylor echoed, “Marster’s overseer was mean to us after marster died. Nothing we could do would suit him, and he whipped the Negroes.” This unpredictable punishment was perhaps the hardest for slaves to bear psychologically. The capricious whipping of overseers offered slaves no refuge in good behavior. “The overseer on Master’s plantation was a mean old fellow, he carried his gun all the time and would ride a big fine horse and go from one bunch of slaves to the other,” explained Octavia George. Similarly, Wheeler Gresham mentioned, “Ef a overseer got rough an’ wanted to beat a nigger, he had to go right den and dar. Dem overseer fellows wuz rough anyhow, dey warn’t our sort of folks.” Hal Huston described his mother being whipped for no reason by his overseer:

“He never did whip me much ‘cause I was kind of a pet. I worked up to the Big House, but he sho’ did whip them others. Why, one day he was beating my mother, and I was too small to say anything, so my big brother heard her crying and came running, picked up a chunk and that overseer stopped a’beating her. The white boy was holding her on the ground and he was whipping her with a long leather whip. They said they couldn’t teach her no sense and she said ‘I don’t wanna learn no sense.’”

Such unwarranted violence did not go unchallenged. Masters and mistresses alike resisted overseers’ efforts to assert control, usually in an effort to retain the benevolent, paternalistic image they aimed to project of themselves. They often stipulated that overseers could only issue punishments at their discretion and with their supervision, so as to maintain hierarchical control themselves. The most common form of resistance by masters and mistresses was firing the overseer for excessive violence. Sometimes overseers were even replaced by promoting a slave as the black overseer. Andy Marion recalled his mistress replacing his two white overseers with a black overseer: “Miss Mary run them both off and told marster what she couldn’t see to when he was away, she’d pick out one of de slaves to see after.”

Similarly, Mrs. John Barclay recalled, “One time marster found out the over-seer was so mean to me, so he discharged him and released me from duty for awhile.” Salomon Oliver boldly
declared, “If the slaves were not being treated right – out go the white overseer. Fired!”

“The overseer couldn’t whip the niggers, except in her [the Mistress] presence, so that she could see that it wasn’t brutal. She didn’t allow the women to be whipped at all. When an overseer got rough, she would fire him,”

F.H. Brown additionally remarked.

Alice Alexander recalled her master firing the overseer for his lack of control over the enslaved: “We had an overseer back on Colonel Threff’s plantation and my mother said he was the meanest man on earth. He’d jest go out in de fields and beat dem niggers, and my mother told me one day he come out in de field beating her sister and she jumped on him and nearly beat him half to death and old Master come up jest in time to see it all and fired dat overseer. Said he didn’t want no man working for him dat a woman could whip.”

In one exceptional case, the mistress fired the overseer and appointed herself as interim overseer of the plantation. Valley Perry described her mistress, “Mis’ Lucy”, as an “angel.”

Perry juxtaposed the character of Mis’ Lucy with that of her overseer who she stated, “wus kinder mean ter de slaves, an’ when he whupped dem dey ‘membered hit ter de longest day dey lived.”

She recalled that Mis’ Lucy would beg the overseer to temper his punishments against the slaves and often grab his arm and cry hysterically to get him to stop. Finally, Perry described, the overseer complained to the master, Mr. Nat, and threatened to quit if Mr. Nat “doan make Mis’ Lucy keep outen his business.”

The overseer and Mr. Nat agreed that each Tuesday Mr. Nat would take Mis’ Lucy off the plantation so he could whip the slaves without any disruptions. Perry detailed, however, that one Tuesday, Mr. Nat and Mis’ Lucy arrived home earlier than expected. “When dey drives up in de yard de oberseer am so busy whuppin’ de niggers what has done bad dat he ain’t seed Mis’ Lucy till she am right on him, den she snatch de heavy bullwhip an’ she strikes him two or three times right in de face… Dat settled de oberseer’s hash an’ after he left Mis’ Lucy went ter doctorin’ cut up backs. Gran’mammy said dat dar wusn’t no more trouble wid de niggers an’ Mis’ Lucy done all of de punishin’ herself,” concluded Perry.
Slave Resistance to Overseer Violence

Masters were not the only figures who contested overseers. Slaves also employed various forms of resistance against overseers’ attempts to assert control, in an effort to reclaim their own agency and dignity. One form of resistance slaves used was “conjure.” Mattie Logan recalled one “cure for mean overseers” on the nearby Lewis plantation:

“Get a king snake and put the snake in the overseer’s cabin. Slip the snake in about, no, not about, but just exactly nine o’clock at night. Seems like the time was important, why so, I don’t remember now. That’s what the slaves did. Put in the snake and out went the overseer. Never no more did he whip the slaves on that plantation because he wasn’t working there no more! When he went, when he went, or how he went nobody knows, but they all say he went. That’s what counted – he was gone!”

A second way slaves resisted their overseers was by cooperating with one another. If they could undermine new overseers’ efforts to assert control, they would never attain full authority over them. George Womble told his WPA interviewer:

“The slaves knew that whenever Mr. Womble hired a new overseer he always told the prospect that if he couldn’t handle the slaves his services would not be needed. The cook had heard the master tell a prospective overseer this and so whenever a new one was hired the slaves were quick to see how far they could go with him. Mr. Womble says that an overseer had to be a very capable man in order to keep his job as overseer on the Womble plantation because if the slaves found out that he was afraid of fighting him (and they did sometimes) they took advantage of him so much so that the production dropped and the overseer either found himself trying to explain to his employer or else looking for another job. The master would never punish a slave for beating an overseer with his fists stated Mr. Womble.”

Womble’s recollection demonstrated that the enslaved actively challenged overseers’ efforts for psychological control. Much of
the success of the plantation depended on this race between the enslaved and the overseer to claim control, and Womble illustrated that the master harbored no qualms about releasing overseers if they failed to meet the burdens stipulated in their mutual agreement.

Another common form of resistance among slaves was running away. “De overseer give all de whippin’s,” described Fred Brown:

“Sometimes when de nigger gits late, ‘stead of comin’ home and takin’ de whippin’ him goes to de caves of de river and stays and jus’ comes in night time for food. When dey do dat, de dawgs is put after dem and den it am de fight ‘tween de nigger and de dawg. Jus’ once a nigger kills de dawg with de knife, dat was close to freedom and it come ‘fore dey ketches him. When dey whips for runnin’ off, de nigger am tied down over a barrel and whipped ha’d, till dey draws blood, sometimes.”114

However, the use of bloodhounds as previously detailed severely limited the chances of successful escape. Hence, slaves’ attempts to reclaim their agency by running away were rather limited.

Perhaps the least common form of resistance among slaves was violent resistance. Some slaves sought to reclaim their agency by countering the violence of the overseer with their own physical violence. Phillip Evans recounted an instance in which the overseer provoked tension with his Uncle Dennis. “Who was de overseers?” Evans repeated, “Mr. Wade Rawls was one and Mr. Osborne was another. There was another one but ‘spect I won’t name him, ‘cause him had some trouble wid my Uncle Dennis. ‘Pears like he insult my aunt and beat her. Uncle Dennis took it up, beat de overseer, and run off to de woods… After de ‘vestigation they take him to de whippin’ post of de town, tie his foots, make him put his hands in de stocks, pulled off his shirt, pull down his britches and whip him terrible.”115 Ida Henry recalled her overseer’s attempts to assert his own authority after her master left for war, stating, “As me Master went to de War de old overseer tried himself in meanness over de slaves as seemingly he tried to be important.”116 Henry related how the
slaves on her plantation actually killed their overseer for his attempts to assert psychological control:

“One day de slaves caught him and one held him whilst another knocked him in de head and killed him...Before de slaves killed our overseer, he would work ‘em night and day. De slaves was punished when dey didn’t do as much work as de overseer wanted ‘em to do. He would lock ‘em in jail some nights without food and kept ‘em dere all night, and after whipping ‘em de next morning would only give ‘em bread and water to work on till noon. When a slave was hard to catch for punishment dey would make ‘em wear ball and chains. De ball was ‘bout de size of de head and made of lead.”

Other examples exist of slaves engaging in violence against overseers. Martha Bradley detailed her violent resistance to the sexual advances of her overseer. She stated, “One day I wuz workin’ in de field and de overseer he come ‘round and say sumpin’ to me he had no bizness say. I took my hoe and knocked him plum down. I know I’se done sumpin’ bad so I run to de bushes. Marster Lucas come and got me and started whoopin’ me. I say to Marster Lucas whut dat overseer sez to me and Marster Lucas didn’ hit me no more. Marse Lucas wuz allus good to us and he wouldn’ let no body run over his niggers.”

Anna Baker remembered a story of violence directed at an overseer:

“I recolled a tale my mammy tol’ me ‘bout my gran’pa... Ever’thing was all right ‘till one o’ dem uppity overseers tried to act smart. He say he gwine a-beat him. My gran’pappy went home dat night an’ barred de door. When de overseer an’ some o’ his frien’s come after him, he say he ain’t gwine a-open dat door, Dey say if he don’t dey gwine a-break it in. He tell ‘em to go ‘head. Whilst dey was a-breakin’ in he filled a shovel full o’ red hot coals an’ when dey come in he th’owed it at ‘em. Den whilst dey was a-hollerin’ he run away. He ain’t never been seen again to dis good day.”

Lastly, Sallie Carder recalled her father’s attempt at disobedience to the overseer, stating, “De only trouble between whites and blacks on our plantation was when de overseer tied my mother to...
whip her and my father untied her and de overseer shot and killed him.” Carder’s recollection illustrates that even despite the best efforts of slaves to resist the overseer’s assertions of physical, sexual, and psychological control, violent resistance had its limits. However, as demonstrated above, this featured as a common theme for all types of resistance. While slaves actively resisted overseers’ control to try and reclaim their agency and dignity, such resistance often proved futile and was almost always met with even greater violence from overseers.

**Conclusion**

This paper has painted a picture of plantation overseers as ruthless, power-hungry brutes. Yet, it deserves note that on rare occasions, slaves described having kind overseers. Isaac Stier confirmed, “Us had a overseer on de place, but warn’t mean lak I’se heard o’ other folks havin’. He was Mr. William Robinson. He was good to every’body, both white an’ cullud. Folks didn’ min’ workin’ for him, ‘cause he spoke kin’. But dey dassen’ sass ‘im. He was poor. My pappy b’longed to his pa, Mr. John Robinson. Dat was a nice fam’ly wid sho’ ‘nough ‘ligion. Whilst dey warn’t rich, dey had learnin’.” Similarly, when asked by her interviewer, “Did the overseers whip you or were they good,” Rachel Sullivan replied, “Overseers wus good…Dere was Emmanuel and Mr. DeLoach. Dey couldn’t whup us or treat us mean.” Finally, ex-slave, Anthony Dawson, reported that his overseers served as conductors on the Underground Railroad:

“Dis boy got out in de big road to walk in de soft sand, and long come a wagon wid a white overseer and five, six, niggers going somwhar. Dey stopped and told dat boy to git in and ride. Dat was de last anybody seen him. Dat overseer and another one was cotched after awhile, and showed up to be underground railroaders. Dey would take a bunch of niggers into town for some excuse, and on de way jest pick up a extra nigger and show him what to go to git on de ‘railroad system.’”

Yet even if some overseers proved kind, such behavior was usually at the behest of masters who frowned upon excessive violence. 

**Overseers’ Quest**
punishment. Moreover, the overwhelming amount of negative characterizations of overseers compared to positive ones indicates that thoughtful overseers were few and far between.

Ultimately, the presentation of overseers in the WPA Narratives dispels the idea that the “caricature” of the overseer is merely exaggeration, and instead demonstrates that overseers were hired largely to fit the stereotype of an “evil white man with a whip.” Overseers utilized both ritual and unpredictable punishments and behaviors to physically, psychologically, and sexually control the enslaved. Overseers bore responsibility for a range of various tasks and duties, and thus were able to exercise control in almost every aspect of the lives of the enslaved—from waking them up in the morning to concluding their work at the end of the day. Both white and black overseers alike turned to violence as a means of control. Overseers inflicted violence as an incentive for labor, a punishment for disobedience and running away, a means of sexual coercion, out of pure sadism, and sometimes for no reason at all. Such intense efforts for control led masters, mistresses, and slaves to all exercise their own forms of resistance. The most successful method employed by masters and mistresses was firing the overseer and replacing them with a less violent, sometimes enslaved, overseer. On the other hand, the enslaved resisted through conjure, cooperation among slaves, running away, and even violence—all in an effort to regain agency, dignity, and control. Thus, the sympathetic view of overseers shared by some modern scholars is unjustified, and the descriptions of overseers from the mouths of those they sought to control in the WPA Narratives suggests that this “caricature” of overseers was largely grounded in reality.

Notes

3 The WPA Narratives can be found at the Library of Congress site: https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-
project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/+ hereafter cited as LOC WPA, with the interviewee’s name and state, or volume number and state where the name is not given.

4 Webber, “Plantation Overseers and Their World.”

5 LOC, WPA.


7 Woodward, “History from Slave Sources.”


9 Woodward, “History from Slave Sources.”

10 Escott, “The Art and Science of Reading WPA Slave Narratives.”


13 Reverend Silas Jackson, Maryland, LOC WPA.

14 Alec Pope, Georgia, LOC WPA.

15 Daniel William Lucas, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.

16 Charlie Grant, South Carolina, LOC WPA.

17 Robert Grinstead, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.

18 George Womble, Georgia, LOC WPA.

19 Mary James, Maryland, LOC WPA.

20 Clare C. Young, Mississippi, LOC WPA.

21 Reverend Silas Jackson, Maryland, LOC WPA.

22 Bert Mayfield, Kentucky, LOC WPA.

23 Anthony Dawson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.

24 Reverend Silas Jackson, Maryland, LOC WPA.

25 Mary James, Maryland, LOC WPA.

“Overseers’ Quest” 47
26 Alexander Scaife, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
27 Reverend Silas Jackson, Maryland, LOC WPA.
28 Andy Marion, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
29 Perry Lewis, Maryland, LOC WPA.
30 Harriet Robinson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
32 Mrs. M.S. Fayman, Maryland, LOC WPA.
33 Stephen McCray, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
34 Emma Howard, Alabama, LOC WPA.
35 Hal Hutson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
36 Ben Horry, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
37 Hannah McFarland, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
38 Bert Luster, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
39 Stephen McCray, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
40 Janie Gallman, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
41 Ophelia Whitley, North Carolina, LOC WPA.
42 Andy Marion, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
43 Anna Baker, Mississippi, LOC WPA.
44 Fred Brown, Texas, LOC WPA.
45 Robert Grinstead, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
47 Joyner, Down by the Riverside, 68.
48 Adele Frost, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
49 Lizzie Farmer, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
50 Robert Grinstead, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
51 Anthony Dawson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
52 Emma Howard, Alabama, LOC WPA.
53 Annie Young Henson, Maryland, LOC WPA.
54 Richard Macks, Maryland, LOC WPA.
55 Lou Smith, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
56 Anthony Dawson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
57 William Curtis, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
58 Ben Horry, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
59 Ben Horry, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
60 Joyner, Down by the Riverside, 69.
61 Emma Howard, Alabama, LOC WPA.
62 Daniel William Lucas, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
63 Richard Macks, Maryland, LOC WPA.
64 Mary James, Maryland, LOC WPA.
65 Reverend Silas Jackson, Maryland, LOC WPA.
Overseers typically utilized one of two basic management systems on the plantation. The most commonly used management system was known as the “gang system.” Under the gang system, enslaved field hands were divided into small groups, known as gangs, under the careful supervision of an overseer or a driver. The purpose of the gang was to force each field hand to continue labor until all were discharged from the field. The gang system was considered the more brutal of the two and offered slaves less autonomy in their labor. Under the task system, each hand was given a specific daily assignment. Slaves could work at their own personal pace and quit when their task was complete. Many overseers utilized the task system to incentivize slaves. Slaves usually preferred the task system as it required less supervision by overseers and drivers, offered more autonomy, and allowed slaves to pursue their own personal interests when their labor was complete. Tasks were allotted based on the age and physical ability of the slave. Masters and overseers often used a combination of both systems for different crops. For more information on the distinctions between gang systems and tasks systems see: Kenneth M. Stampp, *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
Clare C. Young, Mississippi, LOC WPA.
Minnie Fulkes, Virginia, LOC WPA.
Dennis Simms, Maryland, LOC WPA.
Charley Williams, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Lucy McCullough, Georgia, LOC WPA.
Katie Rowe, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
R.S. Taylor, North Carolina, LOC WPA.
Octavia George, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Wheeler Gresham, Georgia, LOC WPA.
Hal Hutson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Andy Marion, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
Mrs. John Barclay, Texas, LOC WPA.
Salomon Oliver, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
F.H. Brown, Arkansas, LOC WPA.
Alice Alexander, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Valley Perry, North Carolina, LOC WPA.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Mattie Logan, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
George Womble, Georgia, LOC WPA.
Fred Brown, Texas, LOC WPA.
Phillip Evans, South Carolina, LOC WPA.
Ida Henry, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Ibid.
Martha Bradley, Alabama, LOC WPA.
Anna Baker, Mississippi, LOC WPA.
Sallie Carder, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
Isaac Stier, Mississippi, LOC WPA.
Rachel Sullivan, Georgia, LOC WPA.
Anthony Dawson, Oklahoma, LOC WPA.
International Waters: 
Putting Hawaii Back in the American Civil War

Rebecca Leidenheimer

In February 1864, days before General William Tecumseh Sherman and his forces entered Jackson, Mississippi, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln took the time to write a letter to the newly-crowned king of Hawaii.\(^1\) Consoling the monarch on the death of his brother and predecessor, Lincoln wished him success in his reign. “Your Majesty may ever firmly rely upon my sincere sympathy and cordial support,” the President wrote, acknowledging that American feelings toward Hawaii were “of almost paternal regard, as well as of sincere friendship and unchanging interest.”\(^2\) Even as the Civil War raged, Lincoln and his cabinet understood the importance of maintaining American influence in the Pacific.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Steven Hahn writes that “[telling] a familiar story in an unfamiliar way...challenges our understanding of the past and the future to which it gave rise.”\(^3\) By centering the experience of Hawaii during the Civil War, this paper aims to illuminate the global implications of the conflict, tying together both Manifest Destiny in the Pacific and the “Age of Revolutions” rocking the Atlantic world. Hawaiian scholar Rhoda E. A. Hackler asserts that with the outbreak of the Civil War, American Secretary of State William Seward “presumably did not have time for the sort of problems which arose in far off Hawai’i.”\(^4\) Yet Seward also signed Lincoln’s 1864 letter to Kamehameha V, revealing that both the Secretary of State and the President were tracking the Hawaiian situation and aware of the death of Kamehameha IV. Historian Don H. Doyle argues that the American Civil War “must be understood within the context of alternating swells of revolutionary hope and reactionary oppression that radiated through the Atlantic world in the Age of

“International Waters”
Revolution.” In Doyle’s 2015 *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the Civil War*, the kingdom of Hawaii receives only a brief parenthetical mention despite its close ties to the U.S. and the broader world system. As Steven Hahn argues, “the Atlantic framework greatly underestimates the importance of the Pacific” in nineteenth century events. Putting Hawaii, a Pacific island kingdom with a large American population, back in the Civil War connects these two narratives and draws attention to the ways that the Atlantic and Pacific worlds influenced each other.

Scholars of the Civil War's effect on Hawaii have focused primarily on its economic impact, crediting the conflict with dealing a death blow to the New England-based American whaling industry, previously the islands' primary source of capital. In the years before the Civil War, whaling had been on the decline—the discovery of petroleum in 1859 made whale oil impractical and expensive, and overfishing led to scarcity. Then came the war, and with the combination of Confederate piracy (destroying over $1 million in ships and $500,000 in whale oil) and the sinking of whalers by the Union Navy to blockade the port of Charleston, the industry was brought to its knees.

As whaling died, sugar cultivation became increasingly profitable in Hawaii. American demand for Hawaiian sugar rose since the Union was cut off from the supply of Louisiana’s plantations. During the Civil War, the number of Hawaiian sugar plantations increased almost threefold, and from 1860 to 1866 sugar exports went from less than a million and a half pounds per year to over seventeen million pounds per year. Significantly, most of the sugar planters in Hawaii were Americans of New England origin. Forty years after the war, this disparity was even more pronounced; Americans “owned four acres of land for every one owned by a native.” The growing postbellum power of the American sugar barons proved overwhelming to the Hawaiian monarchy. By 1893, their influence enabled them to depose Queen Liliuokalani and form the Republic of Hawaii, which U.S. President William McKinley annexed in 1898. Historian Jeffrey Allen Smith notes the irony of the Civil War’s economic impact on the islands: “the war that strengthened the United States as a
country laid the foundation for the destruction of the kingdom of Hawaii.”

While important, the transition from whales to sugar should not dominate discussion of Hawaii’s role in the Civil War. Hahn notes that “it is impossible to grasp the significance of many of the important events of the nineteenth century...without recognizing the Pacific as an American destiny, real and imagined.” Lincoln and Seward harbored interest in maintaining American influence in Hawaii not only for the sake of the sugar trade, but also because of the kingdom’s location. By 1853, “the importance of the islands to the United States had increased due to the U.S. presence on the Pacific Coast, the prospect of a new and more stable government in China, and the opening of Japan to commerce.” Although historians frequently limit their discussion of the Civil War to its domestic dimensions, the conflict occurred in a time of U.S. expansion and growing influence on the world stage. Both Lincoln and Seward understood that the Pacific links America was forging needed protection.

As a monarchy, Hawaii had a stake in what Ramón Castilla, the president of Peru, called a “war of the crowns against the Liberty Caps,” in which European monarchs would try to reassert their global authority in the face of the demonstrated failure of America’s “republican experiment.” The kings of Hawaii during the Civil War period (Kamehameha IV [reigned 1856-1863] and Kamehameha V [reigned 1863-1872]) firmly sought to align themselves with the European “crowns” rather than the American “liberty caps,” who posed more of a threat to Hawaiian sovereignty. While Hawaii officially declared neutrality in the U.S. Civil War, it is important to note that “as the old European regimes had an interest in the failure of America's experiment in democracy, so too did the King of Hawaii and the political elite who served him.”

Historians have debated why King Kamehameha IV waited until August 1861 to declare Hawaii’s neutrality—and it was not until September that the king bothered to officially publish his proclamation of neutrality in a newspaper. Scottish-born Robert Crichton Wyllie, the kingdom’s foreign minister for

“International Waters”
two decades, believed that the Confederacy would eventually win independence. Yet recognizing the Confederacy would be dangerous given the overwhelmingly pro-Union American presence in the islands. Thus, Wyllie instead advocated for a closer alliance with Great Britain to counter the strength of American influence. Wyllie worked tirelessly to garner respect for Hawaii on the international stage. The Hawaiian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a busy place despite its size: a Russian visitor in 1860 described how "all the walls of the single room housing the ministry were lined with books, and there were piles of papers in the corners and on the tables...piles of papers were lying on the floor. Wyllie presided amidst all this in his dress uniform..." Led by Wyllie, Hawaii actively cultivated international ties, determined not to be subsumed by American interests.

One of the ways in which Hawaii tried drawing itself closer to the English monarchy, in particular, was through religion. American missionaries had been a constant presence in the islands since the 1820s, and wielded significant social influence. Hawaiian nobility, including future kings and queens, received education at American missionary schools—accounting perhaps for the “paternal regard” referred to by Lincoln in his 1864 letter. The well-traveled anglophile Kamehameha IV, however, thought Episcopalianism was “more compatible with monarchical government” than the American missionaries’ Congregationalism. His brother Lot, later Kamehameha V, recalled in 1870 that “we thought, get England to be interested in us by means of her Church….and she will begin to learn more of us and take more interest in us which well fostered will ripen into a great friendship,” a counterweight to Lincoln’s reminder of Americans’ “sincere friendship and unchanging interest.” The Hawaiian royal family also developed a close relationship with Great Britain’s Queen Victoria. Indeed, she was the godmother of the tragically short-lived Crown Prince of Hawaii (who died in August 1862 at the age of four) as well as a personal correspondent of Kamehameha IV’s wife, Queen Emma.

American racial ideology and the perceived greater tolerance across the Atlantic contributed to the Hawaiian monarchy’s desire to align itself with Great Britain. As a young
prince in 1850, Kamehameha IV had traveled to the United States and found himself subject to American racial prejudices. While boarding a train in Washington, D.C., he was told to move by a conductor who did not know his royal status and assumed he was African-American and therefore in the “wrong,” white passengers only, carriage. The prince wrote in his journal that this was “the first time that I ever received such treatment, not in England or France, or anywhere else. But in this country I must be treated like a dog to go & come at an Americans bidding.” Americans in Hawaii shared American racist beliefs: Alexander J. Cartwright, a prominent leader of the Union cause and the chairman of the American Patriotic Fund in Honolulu, “spoke publicly and habitually of ‘damned black kanakas [Native Hawaiians]’...by which he meant all Hawaiians from the royal family down.” During the Civil War, Native Hawaiian soldiers who served the Union did so in segregated.regiments. Such American attitudes stood in contrast to Kamehameha IV’s experience in England, which he found more free of racial prejudices.  

As Kamehameha IV drew his monarchy closer to Great Britain, Lincoln and Seward took steps to maintain American influence in the islands. They recalled U.S. Commissioner to the Hawaiian Islands Thomas Dyer and replaced him with James McBride in March 1863. McBride’s position was elevated to Minister Resident of the United States, making him the highest-ranking foreign official in the Islands. In 1861, the New York Times warned its readers that “the Powers of the Old World are flocking to the feast from which the scream of our eagle has hitherto scared them.” No doubt by promoting McBride, Lincoln and Seward aimed to keep the American eagle screaming, a message to other foreign powers in Hawaii that America’s influence would not wane.

The American Civil War served as a warning to the Hawaiian nobility about how a nation could be torn asunder from within. In 1864 King Kamehameha V, an “uncompromising nativist,” decided it was time for a new constitution, thanks in part to the bloody events in America. Like many European monarchs in the wake of the Civil War, Kamehameha V saw American-style democracy as dangerous and in need of curtailment. Manley
Hopkins, British consul general in Hawaii, wrote that the purpose of the new 1864 constitution was “to destroy the radical element in the [previous] constitution, to base electoral privilege on a property qualification, and to give a larger place in the State to the king, allowing him to govern as well as reign.”

At the constitutional convention, chief David Kalakaua, who would become king ten years later, listened as another delegate gave an impassioned defense of American-style universal suffrage. To make his point, the delegate argued that widespread poverty in Great Britain could be blamed on that country’s limited voting rights. Kalakaua responded that while the man had mentioned Britain’s misery, he “forgot to say anything of the state of things in America, where universal suffrage did exist, and which was one cause of the present war.”

In an effort to strike a blow at American influence in the islands, the new constitution contained a stern reminder that “The King conducts his government for the common good; and not for the profit, honor, or private interest of any one man, family, or class of men among His subjects.” In the previous 1852 constitution, which had been heavily influenced by American missionaries, this article contained an additional clause which read: “Therefore in making laws for the nation, regard shall be had to the protection, interest and welfare not only the King, the Chiefs, and rulers, but of all people alike.” By removing this final clause, Kamehameha V and his government reasserted the supremacy of the monarch and subtly turned the article into a rebuke of American influence.

An intriguing footnote to Hawaii’s involvement in the Civil War is the postbellum activity of Samuel Chapman Armstrong, one of the few Hawaiian-born sons of American missionaries who fought in the conflict. (Scholars have noted that most Hawaiians who entered the war were kanakas, including a few pressed into service on Confederate raiders.) During the war, Armstrong commanded an all-black regiment in the Union Army. In 1868, he founded the Hampton Institute (later Hampton University) in Virginia, designed to teach newly-freed African-Americans technical and agricultural skills in a Christian setting. Armstrong said “it meant something...perhaps to the ex-slaves of
America, that...there was worked out in the Hawaiian Islands the problem of the emancipation, enfranchisement, and Christian civilization of a dark-skinned Polynesian people in many respects like the negro race.”

Hampton alumnus Booker T. Washington wrote that “many of the ideas and much of the inspiration [Armstrong] used to such good effect in this country, he got in Hawaii.”

Hawaiian historian John P. Rosa insists that “the Pacific World was firmly linked by traders, merchants, missionaries, whalers, planters, and laborers to the Atlantic World and the rest of the globe by the end of the nineteenth century.” I would go further to argue that these links were evident by the American Civil War. To Lincoln’s government, Hawaii represented a gateway to Asia as well as a supplier of valuable goods such as sugar, wool, and meat to new states on the American west coast.

To the Hawaiian monarchy, the events of the American Civil War encouraged stronger ties with Great Britain to curb American influence and avoid the pitfalls of universal suffrage and republicanism. At the same time, the Civil War changed the foundation of Hawaii’s economy from whaling to sugar cultivation—a shift that would ultimately undermine the monarchy. Additionally, American conceptions of race and how they were refracted in the experience of Hawaiians helped shape not only Hawaiian reactions to the Civil War, but even U.S. Reconstruction via Armstrong’s Hampton Institute. By focusing the spotlight on Hawaii’s role in the Civil War, we illuminate profound connections between the nineteenth-century Pacific and Atlantic and expand our notions of the Civil War’s international impact.

Notes

2 Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to Kamehameha V, February 2nd, 1864, State of Hawaii Department of Accounting and General Services, Hawai’i State
6 Hahn, “Prologue,” 3.
13 Hackler, “‘Earnest Persuasion,” 61.
16 Ibid.
18 Daws notes that “Lincoln did better in mock elections at Honolulu in 1860 and 1864 than he did in most of the United States.” Daws, “A New Society,” 183.
26 Smith, “The Civil War and Hawaii.”
29 Smith, “The Civil War and Hawaii.”
30 As quoted in Doyle, “The Empires Return,” 106.
33 Ibid.
36 Vance and Manning, “Hawai‘i at Home,” 160.
37 Vance and Manning, "Effects of the American Civil War on Hawai‘i."
39 Ibid, 117.

“International Waters” 59

Erik Roberts

Introduction

The regional conflict in southern Africa reflected a conglomeration of domestic issues and international tensions in the 1970s and 1980s. Domestically, Marxist and conservative factions in Angola waged civil war in the aftermath of decolonization. Tensions between black South Africans and the minority government grew violent in the mid-1970s. Internationally, South Africa sought to impose dominance over Namibia, Angola, and other countries to thwart threats to its apartheid government. To establish its role as the regional hegemon, South Africa occupied Namibia in 1915. Nationalistic sentiments in Namibia rose in the 1960s, making the occupation increasingly contentious. Out of fear that a government unfriendly to South Africa could take root in Angola, the South African Defense Forces (SADF) invaded Angola in 1975. The regional conflict in southern Africa consisted of these domestic and international dynamics.

The United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba added another layer to the international nature of this conflict, as this area developed into an ideological battleground. Eager to gain influence in southern Africa, the Soviet Union supported the Marxist faction in Angola and opposed South African adventurism. The United States, keen to stymie Soviet influence, ardently supported South Africa and the conservative National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Cuba, too, entered the conflict to protect the newly decolonized Angola from foreign encroachment and support Namibian independence. The
conflicts in Angola and Namibia were initially predicated on independence and self-determination for Angola and Namibia. However, the region quickly became another opportunity for the Cold War superpowers to promote their respective systems.

The regional conflict was illustrative of Cold War pressures as a whole. Heightening and lessening of tensions between the superpowers reverberated in southern Africa. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the superpowers were very antagonistic, so they supplied their clients in southern Africa with tangible support—arms, military strategy, and trade. Though the regional conflict proved comparatively less violent in the late 1970s and early 1980s than in 1975-1976 or 1986-1988, tensions remained high. Then, when the superpowers became more agreeable during the late 1980s, especially regarding intervention in the Third World, enhanced relations helped bring an end to this regional conflict. In addition, Cuba’s unflinching commitment and military might in the region established Cuba as the leader of the negotiations that ended the conflict. Its strength in the region facilitated the end of the conflict by cultivating changes in the U.S.-Soviet relationship. The newfound relationship of trust between the superpowers would allow the United States to be an effective mediator in the negotiations that brought about the end of the conflict in southern Africa.

Part One. Doused with Kerosene: The Inception of the Regional Conflict in Southern Africa and Superpower Involvement

Initial Engagement

1975 marked a critical year in the decolonization of southern Africa. After nearly a decade and a half of fighting between the Portuguese colonizers and The Republic of Angola, the fall of the Portuguese Estado Novo regime led to the country’s withdrawal from southern Africa. In Angola, independence was not solely an occasion for celebration; though free from colonial rule, Angola suffered from internal strife as three factions divided the country. Coupled with the rise of Namibian nationalism after

“Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom”
half a century of South African occupation, this development made southern Africa a region rife with internal tensions.¹

However, the rise of nationalism in southern Africa was influenced by global movements. The People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) represented the Marxist faction that vied for power in Angola after Portugal’s withdrawal. Heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, Agostinho Neto—former member of the Portuguese Communist Party and leader of the MPLA—sought Soviet support in the struggle for control of Angola against the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FLNA). Eager to strengthen an already strong Marxist faction in a region with many burgeoning Marxist parties hoping for international aid, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev offered support to the MPLA. It seemed geopolitically prudent to Brezhnev to establish a stronghold in the region. Neto and his successor, José Eduardo dos Santos, found a partner in the Soviets from the onset of the Angolan Civil War.²

The United States involved itself in the early conflict in southern Africa as well. In fact, both the U.S. and the USSR proved active participants in the events in Angola even before South Africa, the regional hegemon, invaded Angola. The Ford administration had authorized covert arms shipments to the FLNA as early as January 1975 out of fear that the Soviet Union would escalate its commitment to the MPLA. Ford worried that if the Soviet Union gained influence in Angola, it could spread Marxism-Leninism to numerous other newly decolonized countries in Africa. Even before the first shots were fired, this conflict was steeped in Cold War tensions.³

As the power of the MPLA rose in Angola, the United States and South Africa grew increasingly fearful of the potent Marxist doctrine in Africa. The South African government in Pretoria “feared that the USSR had a grand design to bring all southern Africa within its sphere of influence.”⁴ At the behest of the CIA and Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State for U.S. President Gerald Ford, South Africa intervened in Angola on October 14, 1975, aiming to topple the MPLA regime. The invasion failed miserably—Angolan and Cuban forces quickly
repelled South Africa. The conflict became truly regional with South Africa’s attack on Angola, as this was the first armed clash since Portugal left Angola. In a memorandum to President Ford in late December 1975, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft held out hope that the Soviets would show restraint in southern Africa, but nonetheless acknowledged that Moscow was “willing to go a significant distance to support an MPLA victory” to cement a Marxist influence in the region. As détente failed in the mid and late 1970s, America increasingly sought to thwart the spread of Marxism. The United States prepared to increase its involvement in this conflict, and the USSR did the same.

Though the level of commitment from America and the Soviet Union increased, the most direct involvement came from Cuba. Starting in 1965, Cuba sent material aid, military strategists, and even troops to Angola, among other newly decolonized African nations. Its intention was purely ideological; Castro genuinely cared about “aiding [Angola, Mozambique, and others] in their struggle for independence.” He sent thousands of troops to stymie the South African invasion in 1976. Cuba would remain in southern Africa throughout the conflict to protect Angola and Namibia and try to counter South Africa’s influence. In terms of manpower, materiel, and ideology, Cuba became the most committed foreign power in the regional conflict.

Quiet Phase

After the initial South African invasion of Angola, domestic conflicts increased in importance. Inter-factional violence proved quite prevalent in Angola and Namibia between 1976-1985. Even though much of the violence during this period appeared domestic, the interconnectedness of the future of Angola’s leadership and South Africa’s continued occupation of Namibia transformed these domestic clashes into regional ones. As these conflicts persisted and intensified in this span, both the Soviet Union and United States held an “almost apocalyptic fear of the consequences if the opponent won.” Each feared a shift in the global balance of power if their adversary gained influence in the region. President Jimmy Carter’s desire to let the southern...
African nations “solve their problems without outside interference” reflected a mere platitude as America continued covert assistance to the FLNA and then to UNITA when the factions merged. The Soviets became the preferred arms supplier for SWAPO, the dominant paramilitary group in Namibia, and the Cubans sent military training instructors and troops to assist the MPLA in Angola. Just as the United States felt the need to respond to Soviet commitment, the Soviet Union acted reflexively to American overtures. A victory for UNITA and South Africa represented an achievement for capitalism and the West. The opposite was true for an MPLA win. When the Americans committed resources, the Soviets felt they needed to respond with increased commitment of their own. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister L.F. Illichev charged that the “rising threat of neocolonialist…maneuvers by Western powers” in Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, and Angola prompted the Soviet Union to redouble its commitment in arms to the MPLA and others. Mutual distrust caused both superpowers to increase involvement in the far south of Africa.

This fear proved emblematic of the superpowers’ Third World dynamic. Both countries were bent towards the goal of modernizing world order with their system of governance and economics—though they of course diverged on which system could bring about a prosperous modernity. Moreover, they each sought to prevent their adversary from spreading what each country viewed as a fundamentally destructive system. In the case of southern Africa, the desire to spread ideology and prevent the enemy from doing the same caused both nations to deepen their involvement.

Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 further strained the tense U.S.-Soviet relationship. An ardent anti-Communist since his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan brought blustering rhetoric and deep cynicism towards the Soviet Union to the White House. He was much more eager to engage in regional conflict than Carter; the Carter administration often begrudgingly undertook its commitment to southern Africa. Given the escalation of Soviet commitment and the growing
Cuban military presence, the adversarial East vs. West dynamic forced Carter to respond.

Regan, unlike Carter, actively engaged and supported South Africa as a means of opposing Communism. The apartheid government in Pretoria abhorred communism because it had been attracting wide appeal among black South Africans since 1921. Empowering the black majority with a legitimate political structure and purpose posed a grave threat to the existence of apartheid. The minority government required obeisance from the majority to survive. Thus, Pretoria repeatedly rooted out communism within its borders and zealously opposed Marxist encroachment in neighboring countries. Despite its racial politics, Reagan readily supported the staunchly anti-communist, white government in Pretoria to diminish Soviet influence in a region of newly independent countries.\(^{13}\)

Assistant Secretary of State Chester A. Crocker was the primary formulator of U.S. policy towards southern Africa within the Reagan administration. A Georgetown professor of Foreign Service, Crocker brought a scholarly background, pragmatism, and years of experience analyzing American foreign policy to bear on the region. His preferred policy formulations, constructive engagement and linkage, facilitated a more active foreign policy stance. Constructive engagement sought to engage with the minority government in South Africa to foster productive business and governmental relationships with the goal of strengthening the capitalist beacon of southern Africa. Crocker hoped that engaging with Pretoria in this way would create positive relationships that would position America to push South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha’s government to undergo reforms and end apartheid.\(^{14}\)

Linkage, on the other hand, pertained to South Africa’s occupation of Namibia, one of the key contentious dynamics that sustained the regional conflict. Having conquered Namibia from Germany in 1915, South Africa subjected Namibia to apartheid and tied the country’s economy to South Africa’s. Pretoria established “a militarized police” under “an unelected administrator” to control Namibia. As Namibian nationalism grew in strength in the 1960s and 1970s, the United Nations,
SWAPO, and other organizations challenged South Africa’s occupation. International pressure continued to grow in the 1970s. As it did, South Africa’s hold on Namibia became increasingly tenuous.15

The doctrine of linkage accepted that the 1978 UN Resolution 435 for Namibian independence served as the most realistic, unbiased option to deal with Namibia. Knowing that international pressure to support the resolution was increasing, Crocker tied the support of Namibia’s freedom to that of Angola; he would advise South Africa to withdraw its colonial regime from Namibia on the condition that Cuban troops left Angola. Crocker wanted to promote majority rule in Namibia and to “[counter] Soviet-Cuban adventurism.”16 Crocker endeavored to further American interests by helping South Africa emerge from the regional isolation it had experienced on account of Namibian occupation and the failed invasion of Angola in 1975. Overseeing the execution of Resolution 435 while removing Cuban troops from Angola would reduce the threat of a communist takeover in southern Africa.17

Crocker’s implementation of constructive engagement and linkage became a discreet affair. In a coordinated effort between Crocker, CIA Director Bill Casey, Secretaries of State Alexander Haig and George Shultz, and National Security Advisor William Clark, the execution of diplomacy with South Africa was “purposefully kept out of the public gaze.”18 As South Africa became increasingly reviled in the United States Congress, the Reagan administration attempted to engage without drawing attention to the relationship. Crocker rightly feared that his ability to execute diplomacy in southern Africa would be jeopardized if the public knew the extent to which he hoped to interact with the apartheid government. The executive branch’s engagement successfully flew under the radar since the fighting in the region receded in the early 1980s, so southern Africa had faded from the public interest.

For Reagan’s first term, constructive engagement and linkage continued without a significant challenge. Despite hopes for increased U.S.-Soviet trade during Reagan’s first term, mistrust and tension between the two superpowers remained high.
Southern Africa reflected this tension; as the superpowers’ relationship deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the impasse among South Africa, Namibia, the Angolan factions, and Cuba deepened. Nearly a decade of rising tensions made the region susceptible to hot war at any moment.¹⁹


A Shift in Perception of South Africa

Mark Mathabane grew up in Alexandra, one of apartheid South Africa’s most notorious townships. His youth was characterized by feeling “abandoned and betrayed by a world that…seemed to hold out nothing to [him] but hunger, pain, violence and death.”²⁰ Growing up, he lived in constant fear of police raids in the middle of the night in which enforcement officers would assiduously searched for his mother whose “pass”—her personal identification booklet—was incomplete. His mother often hid in a dresser or fled out of a window. If she were caught, the authorities would take Mark’s father to tribal lands in rural South Africa or Namibia to undertake months of hard labor to pay off her debt. This vicious cycle plagued townships. Arbitrary pass laws ruled the land for which compliance was necessary to get a job, but jobs remained unavailable to those without proper passes. This treatment drove Mark to leave South Africa, but many others in Mark’s position opted to join paramilitary groups to oppose the minority government.²¹

In 1984-1985, township residents revolted against the government in a series of uprisings in South Africa. People like Mark’s friends could no longer contain their frustration over the lack of opportunity and constant degradation that the apartheid system brought upon black people. Black South Africans violently rebelled against the white government’s pass laws and constant surveillance, just as they did in the 1976 Soweto Township Uprising. Prime Minister Botha issued a State of Emergency in 1985 in response to the rise of clashes between
township residents and enforcement officers. The South African government heavily deployed its police force and military to townships across the country, brutally suppressing the revolt and killing many of its citizens. The white government exerted control over its black citizenry, creating a public spectacle of violence. It reminded the world that the government in South Africa was a repressive, racist regime.22

The Reagan administration responded minimally to the outbreak of violence in South Africa. Though Crocker, Shultz, and Reagan all knew of the ferocious suppression of the uprisings, they did not want to take harsh economic action for fear of causing negative externalities for black South Africans. In their view, sanctions would further alienate South Africa from the global trade market, which would most directly affect blacks. Constricting South Africa’s access to markets and to capital would result in fewer available jobs, and blacks would be the first to lose their incomes. Politically, they feared that reproaching Pretoria would squander their ability to engage constructively with the country’s leaders. Condemning Botha and cutting off political ties would effectively let Pretoria “off the hook” without giving the United States a chance to use diplomacy to influence South Africa’s policies. Secretary Shultz described this logic in 1986 to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar saying, “The consequences of a lack of action are terrible to contemplate. So even though the probability [of pressuring the South African government to abandon apartheid] is low, it seems to me that we have to work with that probability.”23 This was consistent with Reagan’s Third World policy in which he, as Duke Professor Hal Brands said, favored the “ability to blunt Soviet geopolitical momentum” even if that meant partnering with human rights abusers.24 The administration sacrificed taking an immediate moral stand for a long-term strategy that required engagement.25

The administration knew, however, that it needed to take at least some action to respond to the repression in South Africa. Reagan and his team attempted to denounce Pretoria while maintaining their relationship and avoiding damage to black South Africans. Continuing quiet diplomacy would reinforce the
sentiment that the administration tacitly supported the apartheid government, so Reagan took measures to reassure Congress and the American public that it condemned apartheid. He recalled U.S. Ambassador Herman Nickel in June 1985 and issued Executive Order 12532, which applied light sanctions to Pretoria three months later. With these actions, the administration sought to preempt congressional action, which it assumed would have been more drastic than their light reprimand. Reagan, Crocker, and Shultz hoped that these concrete measures, along with a shift to clearer rhetoric outlining their intentions in South Africa, would mollify Congress and the American people.  

Before the township uprisings, Congress did not impede the administration’s diplomatic mission. Congress’ overall foreign policy making power was in decline through much of Reagan’s presidency. This reflected a sharp break from the assertive character of Congress in the mid-1970s. An intellectual movement in Congress called “new internationalism” fought to build foreign policy making prowess in response to executive overreach towards the end of the Vietnam War. New internationalists “attempted to use congressional power to remake American foreign policy, abandoning... [the] military-centered anti-Communism of the Cold War era” in favor of “promoting human rights and democracy overseas.”  

Starting in the early 1980s, the trend of the new internationalists seemed to falter as the administration took control of foreign policy. The July 1985 repeal of the Clark Amendment, which allowed the executive to uninhibitedly provide extended aid to Jonas Savimbi and UNITA, seemed to corroborate the rollback of congressional foreign policy power which the new internationalists worked to build in the 1970s.  

By the second half of 1985, however, Congress began to reclaim control of foreign policy. Influenced by interest groups as well as the American public, Congress responded severely to the crackdown. Senators condemned apartheid for “state supported mass executions” and enacting arcane security laws that were “not legal and they sure [were] not the way to promote security.” Members of Congress often employed the rhetoric of human
rights, and they condemned engaging, however constructively, with a racist regime.30

In October 1986, Congress revealed its unwillingness to let the administration continue its engagement with South Africa. It would no longer tolerate supporting a government that only a fraction of Americans agreed to support. Following the new internationalists’ lead, Congress banded together behind a stronger sanctions package called the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. Congress intended to undermine the South African government and provide various forms of aid to victims of apartheid. Legislators defiantly passed the bill over a presidential veto on October 1986. This reflected a clear shift away from what Congress broadly considered a foreign policy failure in constructive engagement. Constructive engagement had not achieved any moderation of the South African government, and the regional conflict remained tense (and expensive); thus, Congress wanted to develop a new strategy. Its dramatic reclamation of foreign policy power was emblematic of a shift away from support for the South African regime and towards reconciliation in southern Africa.31

Cuba’s southern African policy was further validated as South Africa descended into violence and repression. Cuba sent troops to Angola in response to the South African invasion in 1975 that America privately supported. Fidel Castro possessed a fervent ideological drive to protect decolonized Angola from colonial aggression. Though the initial turnaround of South African forces in 1975-1976 was successful, Cuba maintained a presence in Angola because the South African government continued to occupy Namibia, repress its own black citizens, and provide aid to UNITA.32

Cuba found its presence in Angola even more necessary as the township uprisings further proved the intransigence and harshness of P.W. Botha and his government. Pretoria’s intensification of its repressive practices proved it was unresponsive to the pressure that Reagan’s administration applied. South African conduct vindicated Cuba’s presence. Cuban forces could not leave Angola while Pretoria displayed aggression and Washington supplied aid to UNITA. Increased repression at home
coupled with two waves of South African attacks on Angola exemplified the rise in South Africa’s hostility. CIA Director Casey corroborated that South Africa’s behavior was unruly when he surmised that even pressure to curtail repression from the white business community within South Africa made “little perceptible effect on Botha.” 33 These actions led to what “Pretoria’s Republican supporters in the administration and on the Hill feared most:” Castro more than tripled his troop count in Angola to 50,000 men.34 Adding legitimacy to the Cuban cause justified increased involvement in the region over the course of the 1980s. The Cubans’ impact on the conflict grew alongside their troop numbers. South Africa had reignited the flame in the region with increased violence. 35

A New Day in the Soviet Union

The trajectory of the Cold War was forever changed when Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev took office as the general secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985. Though his first two years in office did not represent a stark departure from previous Soviet leaders, starting in 1987 Gorbachev took steps that fundamentally altered the superpower dynamic and Soviet commitment to Third World conflicts. Abiding by a framework of ‘new thinking’ in Soviet diplomacy, Gorbachev exhibited his ideological commitment to ending Soviet involvement in regional conflicts.

Vladislav Zubok, an influential historian of Soviet foreign policy, describes Gorbachev’s transformation from another conservative Soviet leader to a genuine reformer. Zubok claims that the combination of “the deterioration of the Soviet economy” and his “romantic notions of international affairs” pushed Gorbachev to institute new foreign policy conceptions. 36 Specifically, Gorbachev genuinely wanted to engage with Reagan and forge a new relationship with the United States. He also wished to scale back Soviet commitment in the Third World and focus on domestic improvement. As the Soviet system deteriorated in the 1980s, Gorbachev came to appreciate that Third World involvement strained the already declining Soviet economy. Gorbachev represented a generational turnover in

“Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom”
Soviet leadership, as he was less scarred by the German invasion in World War II than his predecessors. He also proved adaptable to developments in geopolitics and intent on improving affairs. This leadership from the general secretary was critical to relaxing tensions in southern Africa.37

‘New thinking’ had profound effects on U.S.-Soviet relations. Gorbachev gradually reformulated his views on foreign policy as his relationship with Reagan developed and the Soviet economy worsened. Through a growing relationship of trust fostered by personal interaction at their multiple summits, Gorbachev came to see the U.S. as a partner rather than a foe in the Third World. He realized that the United States did not have the sinister designs that made former Soviet leaders nervous. This helped facilitate Gorbachev’s changing perception of Soviet security. The Kremlin did not feel the same encirclement or threat from the United States that had previously sustained Cold War anxieties for decades. This propelled Gorbachev to seek ways to withdraw from regional military conflicts without damaging Soviet prestige. He believed that “progress on these issues would be of mutual benefit” to both the United States and the Soviet Union; the destructiveness of “zero-sum diplomacy was nearing its end.” 38 Thus, Gorbachev believed that a partnership with the United States could actually improve the Soviet situation, rather than imperil it. This allowed for a changed dynamic between the U.S. and the USSR.39

For the Reagan administration to believe that the “evil empire” had actually changed, actions needed to corroborate words. A clear indication that the doctrine of ‘new thinking’ would have a profound effect came on December 8, 1987, when President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev signed the INF treaty at the Washington Summit. This agreement eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons from each country’s arsenal. The INF treaty benefitted Gorbachev by allowing him to begin cutting military expenditures, and both leaders enjoyed a further improved security environment. Having experienced a momentous success together, Gorbachev and Reagan found a more willing partner in their counterpart.40
The most significant sign of a changed Soviet approach to foreign affairs emerged when Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would withdraw from Afghanistan. In a memo to Secretary Shultz on March 20, 1987, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Michael Armacost reported that during a consultation on foreign diplomacy with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, he categorically declared that the Soviets “should get their troops out of Afghanistan promptly if they are serious about promoting real change in East-West relations.”

Pursuant to Gorbachev’s drive to focus Soviet efforts inward and stop the financial bleeding of external conflicts, the general secretary announced in April 1988 that the Soviet Union would withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in an even faster manner than Shevardnadze described to Armacost.

Gorbachev’s interaction with Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah, the former leader of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, reinforced that a changed ideology, rather than just fiscal practicality, motivated this shift in policy regarding the Third World. In a July 1987 conversation between the two leaders, Gorbachev demonstrated a growing understanding and acceptance of pluralism and of the problems that had plagued socialist governments. At the highest levels of the PDPA, Najibullah admitted, “narrow-mindedness of views, a lack of initiative, a disinclination to free themselves of the burdens of past mistakes, and conservatism” hurt the Party’s goals in Afghanistan and the prospects of Soviet withdrawal. When Najibullah stated “national reconciliation required new approaches and an abandonment of stereotypes and methods which have outlived themselves,” he was clearly talking about socialism. Gorbachev was quick to agree. The leader of the socialist world was coming to terms with the notion that socialism had inherent flaws. As a result, Gorbachev increasingly focused his efforts inward on the Soviet Union to repair his faltering system, rather than remain involved in expensive Third World conflicts. As a result, Gorbachev announced on February 8, 1988 that if the Soviets could strike a multilateral understanding of the terms for withdrawal, he would begin removing troops by May 8, 1988.
In the interim between the announcement and intended start date, Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Shultz, and National Security Advisor Colin Powell met. The tone of this meeting was very cordial. Unlike previous meetings such as the Geneva Conference in which Third World support proved to be a source of discord for the two countries, in this interaction the leaders spoke more as partners than as adversaries. In fact, Shevardnadze called this conversation “a meeting of the minds” on Afghanistan. Gorbachev substantiated his commitment to withdrawing from Third World embroilments by announcing removal of Soviet troops from the most prominent Third World conflict.

The superpowers started showing a willingness to arrive at agreements on Third World issues. Gorbachev sought to focus Soviet efforts inward rather than allocate resources he did not possess to Third World conflicts that were not his main concern. As the regional conflict in southern Africa grew increasingly tense in 1987 and 1988, this newfound cooperation proved useful as the Soviets decided not to interfere in the negotiating process. Moreover, the modulation of the U.S.-Soviet relationship in the Third World allayed both countries’ fears that their adversary remained committed to spreading their system throughout the world. This led to a changed security environment that was conducive to resolving the conflict. But despite these momentous changes, another country possessed even greater leverage than the U.S. or the Soviet Union.

The Cuban Factor

Cuba had been a mainstay in southern Africa throughout the regional conflict. As the only outside power to send troops to the region, Cuba established authority distinct from other external players. The Cubans successfully fended off the initial South African invasion in Angola between 1975 and 1976. They remained in the country and continued to protect the MPLA. To Cuba, America’s support for South Africa and UNITA endangered Angolan and Namibian freedom. Castro would not
remove his troops while these threats persisted. Thus, Cuba stood by its southern African allies for fourteen years.\textsuperscript{47}

Cuba remained in Angola as a defensive force and stood prepared to counterstrike at any moment. In the summer of 1987, South Africa invaded Angola to defend the faltering UNITA military. The South African military stepped up to battle FAPLA—the military wing of the MPLA—at the MPLA military base in Cuito Cuanavale. The SADF turned around FAPLA, which safeguarded Jonas Savimbi and UNITA. Savimbi and General Geldenhuys rejoiced in victory, thinking they had routed the Angolan forces and secured the base. However, their military intelligence was insufficient—the South Africans had been informed only by UNITA reports. In reality, the Cubans hurriedly moved to repel the South Africans from Cuito Cuanavale.\textsuperscript{48}

Cuba exhibited strength through military defense. U.S. intelligence analysts telegrammed to Secretary Shultz that Cuban forces were storming towards Cuito Cuanavale. The telegram noted that “the Cuban press has been careful to emphasize that Cuban troops [had] not been involved in combat.”\textsuperscript{49} Only after the SADF crossed the Namibian border and attacked Cuito Cuanavale would Cuba mobilize its forces in Angola to reverse an offensive. Far from blustering and bluffing as Crocker saw the Cuban leader, Castro had been slowly increasing his military presence to defend against this kind of unprovoked attack. By the time the South Africans invaded Angola again in 1987, Castro boasted 55,000 troops at his disposal and they handily repelled the attack.\textsuperscript{50} Cuba readily proved its military hegemony.

Castro’s decision to send more Cuban troops and weaponry strained Cuban-Soviet relations. The Cubans had hoped that the Soviets would provide arms in the face of South African aggression. The decision to commit their forces to repelling the attack was an arduous one in which Castro and his generals had to determine whether the situation was dire enough to risk Cuban lives to save this town from South African invasion. An icy summit meeting between Castro and Gorbachev in Moscow resulted in Cuba accepting the fact that if they were to respond, they would be doing it alone. Castro remained undecided

“Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom”
about sending troops until he returned to Cuba and read General Arnaldo Ochoa’s sobering assessment that “if the morale and the fighting capacity of the units are not reestablished, a catastrophe is inevitable.” Thus, the Cubans—without notifying the Soviets—struck back in Cuito Cuanavale and reversed South Africa’s advance. With this decision, Cuba established that it would act independently of the Soviet Union and take on a greater role in the southern Africa conflict.

The Reagan administration knew that the Cubans maintained a strong military presence in southern Africa, but it still underestimated the significance of Cuba’s presence in the region. Crocker acknowledged that the Cubans were a “force that you could say was in some way going to be able to challenge the South African conventional forces.” However, the extent to which Castro and the Cubans would gain leverage in southern Africa proved beyond what Crocker had expected. Defying the Soviets and operating as an independent entity, Cuba asserted itself as the dominant foreign power. Cuba had gained leverage after Cuito Cuanavale displayed its military superiority. A cold silence ensued in the Cuban-Soviet relationship in which the Cubans asserted their leading role in southern Africa. After nearly two months of silence, the Soviets came to terms with the fact that southern Africa was now “a Cuban campaign, the Cubans alone would direct it, the Soviets would be informed, but they would not be consulted.”

Gorbachev, committed to ratcheting back the Soviet Union’s commitments in the Third World, accepted this reality. Cuba’s strength forced the Soviets to take a lesser role in the region, which Gorbachev could justify by focusing on Soviet domestic problems. The Soviets could quietly extricate themselves from this conflict without causing damage to the Soviet regime. When Cuba and the United States pressured South Africa to come to the negotiating table, the Soviets closely watched the proceedings even though they would not directly participate. Rather, the United States freely mediated the talks without Cold War impulses, and Cuba possessed the critical negotiating strength.
Negotiations: How the Conflict Ended

South Africa’s status as a pariah state, Cuba’s military dominance, and the improvement to the U.S.-Soviet relationship in the Third World provided the necessary context for the negotiations that ended the regional conflict in southern Africa. South Africa’s failed invasions and increased repression at home weakened its credibility with the United States. Congress’ increasingly hardline stance on South Africa and Pretoria’s near universal condemnation left it without bargaining power at the negotiating table. Cuba’s reversal of South Africa’s advances established it (along with its MPLA partners) as the military hegemon. Cuba thus entered negotiations with strength and authority. The Soviet Union’s altered security environment allowed it to accept that Cuba would not act as a Soviet client. Moreover, having relaxed competition with the Soviet Union in the Third World, the United States could more effectively negotiate because it did not fear Soviet adventurism. April 14, 1988 marked the beginning of an eight-month process of negotiations.

By March 1988, the Reagan administration no longer overtly supported South Africa. While Congress had usurped much of the administration’s formal policymaking power, Reagan, Shultz, and Crocker still covertly engaged with South African leaders. Crocker met with South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha in March 1988 in Geneva. He hoped to “help Botha persuade his truculent leadership to come back into the [negotiating] process.” However, this round of negotiations would prove different from previous talks between Angola, South Africa, and the other actors. In a letter from George Shultz to Pik Botha, Shultz “expressed dismay at the renewed internal repression, urging Botha to avoid a gratuitous confrontation with Western governments and public opinion.” The secretary’s letter conveyed to Botha that the U.S. would not support Pretoria as it had in the past. In these negotiations, the United States truly mediated and did not overtly influence on South Africa’s behalf.

The significant losses that South Africa suffered in the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale pushed some leaders of the ruling

“Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom”
National Party to seek withdrawal from Angola. Cuban military power induced South Africa to come to the negotiating table, which it did in London in May 1988. In London, though, the South African delegation, headed by senior Foreign Ministry Official Neil van Heerden, was “not yet ready to negotiate” in any real capacity.\(^57\) Van Heerden hastily concocted a delegation which included General Geldenhuys, who just days before fought in Cuito Cuanavale. The interlocutors included Cuba, Angola, and South Africa, with Chester Crocker from the U.S. as mediator. The Soviets, conspicuously absent from the talks, played a decidedly inactive role throughout the negotiations. Though the London talks did not lead to significant progress, they did mark the beginning of the essential negotiation process.\(^58\)

During the next two meetings at Brazzaville and Cairo, South Africa arrived at the negotiating table intending to recoup authority. It looked to assert strength by demanding that the linkage between the implementation of UN Resolution 435 and Cuban troop withdrawals be the basis for negotiation. But Cuba, armed with geostrategic superiority, did not immediately respond to South Africa’s bluster at Brazzaville. The Cuban delegation took time to formulate a strategy. When the parties met again in Cairo, Cuba entered with a clear goal—to pressure the South Africans to agree to a plan for Namibian independence and withdraw their troops from Angola and Namibia. Cuba would leave Angola once South Africa met both conditions. It reoriented the negotiations around this plan and hoped the possibility of further military advancement would cause Pretoria to concede. Though Castro and his team had been willing to negotiate with the South Africans in London and Brazzaville, in Cairo they desired to project strength. Castro called Pretoria’s bluff.\(^59\)

By the time the Cairo talks occurred, the Soviets and Americans clearly held the same goals. Both countries wanted South Africa and Cuba to withdraw their forces, for Angola to settle its internal struggle politically rather than militarily, and for Namibian independence to come to fruition in the coming months. This convergence of aims allowed the Soviet Union to feel comfortable taking a secondary role in the negotiations. Chester Crocker offered Soviet diplomats like Anatoly Adamashin and
Vladlen Vasev greater involvement in the negotiations, but they ultimately demurred, preferring “to distance themselves from whatever went wrong while keeping a close eye on the talks by talking with [the U.S.] and with their socialist allies.”60 The Soviets did not need to prolong the conflict, for their original goals of countering American adventurism and establishing a Marxist stronghold (which Cuban involvement was facilitating) no longer reflected their primary concern.61

The Cuban agenda mostly aligned with the American and Soviet one. All three countries desired an independent Namibia and withdrawal of foreign troops from Angola and Namibia. The only substantial divergence was that the Cubans would not withdraw before South Africa categorically accepted Resolution 43. Thus, Cuba had reversed the American policy of linkage. Whereas the Americans initially pushed for Cuba to leave as a prerequisite for South Africa accepting Resolution 435, Cuba’s geopolitical advantage meant it had the leverage to reverse the parameters of the negotiation. It would certainly withdraw, in line with Cuba’s ultimate goal, but on its own terms.62

The South Africans then made a critical military mistake. On June 26, 1988, they again invaded Angola in a desperate effort to regain a strategic advantage in southern provinces of Angola. In doing so the SADF killed 10 Cuban troops. The Cubans responded tactfully and powerfully, forcing the SADF to retreat. At this point, the South African people had become disillusioned by repeated failed invasions. Rather than continuing to absorb military defeats, Pretoria shifted the battleground from Angolan soil to the South African press. P.W. Botha’s government designed a propaganda campaign to bolster anti-Cuban sentiment and maintain support for South Africa’s regional adventurism. However, disapproval of South Africa’s involvement in Angola grew, and pressure—both domestic and international—mounted for the government to reach an agreement. The failure of this military strike cemented Cuba’s military dominance and reflected a crucial turning point in the negotiations.63

Further meetings in New York and Cape Verde featured a changed South African delegation. Having realized the extent of their military inferiority after the June attack, the South Africans

“Foes, Friends, and Fighting for Freedom”
adopted a more conciliatory tone in New York. They attempted to squeeze at least some concessions out of the Cuban delegation to placate hardliners in Pretoria. Yet, the Cubans remained confident in their superior position and forced the South Africans’ hands. Crocker, free from Cold War pressures to forestall the Soviet goals, skillfully mediated the negotiations. The talks in New York led to an informal ceasefire and, more importantly, the South Africa delegation “accepted the Cuban demands” in full.64

Cuba—and therefore Angola and Namibia—had won the diplomatic struggle. The South African forces started withdrawing from Angola and Namibia in August 1988 and completed that process in November of the following year. Southern Africa remained mostly free from regional violence and international influence. In December 1988, the foreign ministers of Cuba, the MPLA government in Angola, and South Africa signed the Angola-Namibia Accords. This agreement formally ended foreign involvement in the two countries and put into motion the implementation of Resolution 435. The United States and the Soviet Union achieved their shared goals in the last round of negotiations. The conflict was over.

Conclusion

The domestic conflicts in southern Africa were never truly domestic. In the Cold War era, the bipolar world order dictated that the two superpowers competed in vulnerable areas. Ideological rigidity characterized the first decade of the conflict in southern Africa; both the Americans and the Soviets sought to counteract their foe from gaining influence in the region. The two sides distrusted each other and supported client governments accordingly.

But after 1985, the outlook of the regional conflict changed. South Africa’s increased repression further isolated the country from the international community. Cuba repelled several South African invasions and bolstered its military hegemony. ‘New thinking’ in the Soviet Union and an altered security perception towards the Third World eased the tensions between the U.S. and USSR in the latter half of the 1980s. This opened the
door for Cuba to emerge as the dominant power in the peacemaking process. The easing of tensions allowed Cuba to redefine the terms of negotiation without external interference and made the U.S. comfortable shepherding the negotiations towards peace as a less ideological mediator.

Cuba’s commitment to Angola and Namibia, both in thought and in action, proved effective. Its decisions were central to the end of the conflict. Cuba usurped power from the Soviet Union, brought the South Africans to the table, and ultimately established the terms of the peace in southern Africa. In the negotiations, the United States acted freely as a mediator rather than a committed partner to South Africa as a result of the modulated superpower relationship. ‘New thinking’ and a fresh Soviet leadership provided the impetus to redefine the terms of that relationship. The regional conflict ended due to Cuban strength, American and Soviet cooperation, and South Africa’s repression and intransigence.

Notes

3 Seymour M. Hersh, "Early Angola Aid by U.S. Reported," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1975,

Ibid., 314.


Ibid., 68.


Ibid., 167.


28 Ibid., 282-285.
34 Castro and Ramonet, *My Life*, 313.
37 Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 412-414.


43 Ibid.


54 Crocker Oral History, 150.


60 Crocker Oral History, 177-178.


For an indication that the two powers were starting to see eye to eye months before, see also “Record of a Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev with US Secretary of State G. Shultz,” February 22nd, 1988, Gorbachev Foundation Archives, *Wilson Center Digital Archives*, accessed April 7, 2017, http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117248


63 Ibid., 468-470.

64 Ibid., 475.