

The impending crisis of the South

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

Hinton Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), pp. 22–28.

As you read...

Hinton Rowan Helper was born in Davie county, North Carolina, in 1829. His parents owned a small farm and four slaves, a husband and wife and their two children. At the age of 20 he moved to New York City, then traveled to California on a ship around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America — then the quickest way to reach the west coast of the United States from the east. In New York and California, Helper became convinced of the superiority of free labor. In 1855, he tried to express his views in an account of his journey called “The Land of Gold,” but his publisher cut out the sections on slavery.

The following year, determined to be heard, Helper wrote *The Impending Crisis of the South*. Even in New York, his views were considered so dangerous that he could not find a publisher. Finally, an agent, A. B. Burdock, agreed to publish the book under his own name.

The Impending Crisis of the South considered slavery on economic grounds, not on religious or humanitarian ones. Helper stood for non-slaveowning whites in the South, whose opportunities were stifled by competition with slave labor. He appealed to northerners with praise for their region’s accomplishments, but he took pride in being a southerner — in fact, he considered it every southerner’s patriotic duty to support abolition, not for the good of the slaves, but for the good of the South.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Helper believe slavery was bad for the South?
2. What kind of people was Helper most interested in helping? How can you tell from this excerpt?
3. Who was Helper’s audience for this book? How can you tell from the way it was written? Were the likely readers the same as the people he wanted most to help?
4. Helper said that “Patriotism makes us a freesoiler... a profound sense of duty to the South makes us an abolitionist.” How did he make that argument?
5. Why did Helper point out that he was the son of a slaveholder? Why did he mention not only that he was from North Carolina but specifically that he was from the Yadkin Valley? (Remember that he was writing for readers far beyond North Carolina.)
6. Find the places in this excerpt where Helper refers to manhood, manliness, or “unmanly” behavior. What does he mean by “manly”? How might his choice of words have appealed to — or insulted — his readers?
7. What reaction did Helper expect from southern readers?
8. Why do you think that most southerners were so angry about Helper’s book?

9. What was the “impending crisis” — the great crisis that was coming soon? Why did Helper welcome it? What outcome did he expect?

The free and the slave states.

It is a fact well known to every intelligent Southerner that we are compelled to go to the North for almost every article of utility and adornment, from matches, shoepegs and paintings up to cotton-mills, steamships and statuary; that we have no foreign trade, no princely merchants¹, nor respectable artists; that, in comparison with the free states, we contribute nothing to the literature, polite arts and inventions of the age; that, for want of profitable employment at home, large numbers of our native population find themselves necessitated to emigrate to the West², whilst the free states retain not only the larger proportion of those born within their own limits, but induce, annually, hundreds of thousands of foreigners to settle and remain amongst them; that almost everything produced at the North meets with ready sale, while, at the same time, there is no demand, even among our own citizens, for the productions of Southern industry; that, owing to the absence of a proper system of business amongst us, the North becomes, in one way or another, the proprietor and dispenser of all our floating wealth, and that we are dependent on Northern capitalists for the means necessary to build our railroads, canals and other public improvements; that if we want to visit a foreign country, even though it may lie directly South of us, we find no convenient way of getting there except by taking passage through a Northern port; and that nearly all the profits arising from the exchange of commodities, from insurance and shipping offices, and from the thousand and one industrial pursuits of the country, accrue to the North, and are there invested in the erection of those magnificent cities and stupendous works of art which dazzle the eyes of the South, and attest the superiority of free institutions!

The North is the Mecca³ of our merchants, and to it they must and do make two pilgrimages per annum — one in the spring and one in the fall. All our commercial, mechanical, manufactural, and literary supplies come from there. We want Bibles, brooms, buckets and books, and we go to the North; we want pens, ink, paper, wafers⁴ and envelopes, and we go to the North; we want shoes, hats, handkerchiefs, umbrellas and pocket knives, and we go to the North; we want furniture, crockery, glassware and pianos, and we go to the North; we want toys, primers⁵, school books, fashionable apparel, machinery, medicines, tombstones, and a thousand other things, and we go to the North for them all. Instead of keeping our money in circulation at home, by patronizing our own mechanics, manufacturers, and laborers, we send it all away to the North, and there it remains; it never falls into our hands again.

In one way or another we are more or less subservient to the North every day of our lives. In infancy we are swaddled in Northern muslin; in childhood we are humored with Northern gewgaws; in youth we are instructed out of Northern books; at the age of maturity we sow our “wild oats” on Northern soil; in middle-life we exhaust our wealth, energies and talents in the dishonorable vocation of entailing our dependence on our children and on our children’s children, and, to the neglect of our own interests and the interests of those

around us, in giving aid and succor to every department of Northern power; in the decline of life we remedy our eye-sight with Northern spectacles, and support our infirmities with Northern canes; in old age we are drugged with Northern physic; and, finally, when we die, our inanimate bodies, shrouded in Northern cambric, are stretched upon the bier, borne to the grave in a Northern carriage, entombed with a Northern spade, and memorized with a Northern slab!

But it can hardly be necessary to say more in illustration of this unmanly and unnational dependence, which is so glaring that it cannot fail to be apparent to even the most careless and superficial observer. All the world sees, or ought to see, that in a commercial, mechanical, manufactural, financial, and literary point of view, we are as helpless as babes; that, in comparison with the Free States, our agricultural resources have been greatly exaggerated, misunderstood and mismanaged; and that, instead of cultivating among ourselves a wise policy of mutual assistance and co-operation with respect to individuals, and of self-reliance with respect to the South at large, instead of giving countenance⁶ and encouragement to the industrial enterprises projected in our midst, and instead of building up, aggrandizing and beautifying our own States, cities and towns, we have been spending our substance at the North⁷, and are daily augmenting and strengthening the very power which now has us so completely under its thumb.

It thus appears, in view of the preceding statistical facts and arguments, that the South, at one time the superior of the North in almost all the ennobling pursuits and conditions of life, has fallen far behind her competitor, and now ranks more as the dependency of a mother country⁸ than as the equal confederate of free and independent States. Following the order of our task, the next duty that devolves upon us is to trace out the causes which have conspired to bring about this important change, and to place on record the reasons, as we understand them,

Why the North has surpassed the South.

And now that we⁹ have come to the very heart and soul of our subject, we feel no disposition to mince matters¹⁰, but mean to speak plainly, and to the point, without any equivocation, mental reservation, or secret evasion whatever. The son of a venerated parent, who, while he lived, was a considerate and merciful slaveholder, a native of the South, born and bred in North Carolina, of a family whose home has been in the valley of the Yadkin for nearly a century and a half, a Southerner by instinct and by all the influences of thought, habits, and kindred, and with the desire and fixed purpose to reside permanently within the limits of the South, and with the expectation of dying there also — we feel that we have the right to express our opinion, however humble or unimportant it may be, on any and every question that affects the public good; and, so help us God, “sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish,” we are determined to exercise that right with manly firmness, and without fear, favor or affection.

And now to the point. In our opinion, an opinion which has been formed from data obtained by assiduous researches, and comparisons, from laborious investigation, logical reasoning, and earnest reflection, the causes which have impeded the progress and prosperity of the South, which have dwindled our commerce, and other similar pursuits, into the most contemptible insignificance; sunk a large majority of our people in galling

poverty and ignorance, rendered a small minority conceited and tyrannical, and driven the rest away from their homes; entailed upon us a humiliating dependence on the Free States; disgraced us in the recesses of our own souls, and brought us under reproach in the eyes of all civilized and enlightened nations — may all be traced to one common source, and there find solution in the most hateful and horrible word, that was ever incorporated into the vocabulary of human economy — Slavery!

Reared amidst the institution of slavery, believing it to be wrong both in principle and in practice, and having seen and felt its evil influences upon individuals, communities and states, we deem it a duty, no less than a privilege, to enter our protest against it, and to use our most strenuous efforts to overturn and abolish it! Then we are an abolitionist? Yes! not merely a freesoiler, but an abolitionist, in the fullest sense of the term. We are not only in favor of keeping slavery out of the territories, but, carrying our opposition to the institution a step further, we here unhesitatingly declare ourself in favor of its immediate and unconditional abolition, in every state in this confederacy, where it now exists! Patriotism makes us a freesoiler; state pride makes us an emancipationist; a profound sense of duty to the South makes us an abolitionist; a reasonable degree of fellow feeling for the negro, makes us a colonizationist. With the free state men in Kansas and Nebraska, we sympathize with all our heart. We love the whole country, the great family of states and territories, one and inseparable, and would have the word Liberty engraved as an appropriate and truthful motto, on the escutcheon of every member of the confederacy. We love freedom, we hate slavery, and rather than give up the one or submit to the other, we will forfeit the pound of flesh¹¹ nearest our heart. Is this sufficiently explicit and categorical? If not, we hold ourself in readiness at all times, to return a prompt reply to any proper question that may be propounded.

Our repugnance to the institution of slavery, springs from no one-sided idea, or sickly sentimentality. We have not been hasty in making up our mind on the subject; we have jumped at no conclusions; we have acted with perfect calmness and deliberation; we have carefully considered, and examined the reasons for and against the institution, and have also taken into account the probable consequences of our decision. The more we investigate the matter, the deeper becomes the conviction that we are right; and with this to impel and sustain us, we pursue our labor with love, with hope, and with constantly renewing vigor.

That we shall encounter opposition we consider as certain; perhaps we may even be subjected to insult and violence. From the conceited and cruel oligarchy of the South, we could look for nothing less. But we shall shrink from no responsibility, and do nothing unbecoming a man; we know how to repel indignity, and if assaulted, shall not fail to make the blow recoil upon the aggressor's head. The road we have to travel may be a rough one, but no impediment shall cause us to falter in our course. The line of our duty is clearly defined, and it is our intention to follow it faithfully, or die in the attempt.

But, thanks to heaven, we have no ominous forebodings of the result of the contest now pending between Liberty and Slavery in this confederacy. Though neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, our vision is sufficiently penetrative to divine the future so far as to be able to see that the "peculiar institution" has but a short, and as heretofore, inglorious existence before it. Time, the righter of every wrong, is ripening events for the desired consummation of our labors and the fulfillment of our cherished hopes. Each revolving

year brings nearer the inevitable crisis. The sooner it comes the better; may heaven, through our humble efforts, hasten its advent.

The first and most sacred duty of every Southerner, who has the honor and the interest of his country at heart, is to declare himself an unqualified and uncompromising abolitionist. No conditional or half-way declaration will avail; no mere threatening demonstration will succeed. With those who desire to be instrumental in bringing about the triumph of liberty over slavery, there should be neither evasion, vacillation, nor equivocation. We should listen to no modifying terms or compromises that may be proposed by the proprietors of the unprofitable and ungodly institution. Nothing short of the complete abolition of slavery can save the South from falling into the vortex of utter ruin. Too long have we yielded a submissive obedience to the tyrannical domination of an inflated oligarchy; too long have we tolerated their arrogance and self-conceit; too long have we submitted to their unjust and savage exactions. Let us now wrest from them the sceptre of power, establish liberty and equal rights throughout the land, and henceforth and forever guard our legislative halls from the pollutions and usurpations of proslavery demagogues....

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Notes

1. A “merchant prince” usually refers to the head of one of the wealthy trading families of Renaissance Italy, such as Lorenzo de Medici, to whom Machiavelli dedicated his book *The Prince*. Helper may not have intended his readers to think about the Medici and Machiavelli, but the reference is a bit ironic, given his later complaints about the “oligarchy” of wealthy southern planters.
2. If you didn’t read it earlier, this article will give you some background on emigration from North Carolina in the antebellum period.
3. Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, is the holiest city of Islam, to which all Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage at least once in their lives. The annual pilgrimage, or *hajj*, brings millions of Muslims to the city. Helper is suggesting that southern merchants have an almost religious obligation to their counterparts in the North.
4. A *wafer* was a small disk, made of flour and gum, that could be moistened and used to seal letters. Wafers were used before the invention of self-sealing envelopes; someone sending a letter would press the wafer over the flap of the envelope, or over the edge of folded paper, to seal it shut.

Before wafers were available, people sealed letters with sealing wax, colored wax sticks that could be melted, dripped onto the folded paper, and pressed with a metal seal (often built into a ring) of a personal design. The letter could not be opened without obviously breaking the seal,

which couldn't be duplicated by anyone else. Wafers were often designed to look like personal seals.

5. *Primers* were basic school books. The implication is that southerners couldn't even teach their children to read without northern books.
6. To give countenance is to grant permission or approval.
7. Compare this to Thomas Jefferson's argument that it was better for southerners to buy manufactured goods than to accept the evils of cities and factories. Most southerners in 1857 agreed with Jefferson.
8. Helper compared the relationship of the South to the North to the relationship between a colony and its mother country. By doing so, he reminded his readers of the Revolution and the arguments made by patriots for American independence. British trade policies had limited colonial manufacturing in an effort to keep the American colonies subservient, and one of the first thing revolutionary governments had to do was to encourage manufacturing of goods colonists could no longer import from Europe.

In a few years, of course, southerners would decide to emulate those Revolutionary patriots, and during the Civil War they would again be forced to support manufacturing to replace goods they could no longer import from the North.

9. There was only one author. Authors of formal works sometimes referred to themselves as "we," in the same way that kings used the "royal 'we.'"
10. "Not to mince words" or matters is to speak directly and frankly.
11. In Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, a moneylender, agrees to give Antonio a loan, but demands that if Antonio cannot repay him, he must give up a pound of his flesh.

About the author

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