

# A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom

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## Review

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**Tewell, Jeremy** *A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom*. Kent State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-1-60635-145-1

### Exploring the Importance of Slavery to American Democracy

No single word is as essential to the meaning of the American experience—or as contested—as “equality.” Democrats today claim to favor providing as much equality of opportunity as possible; their Republican critics argue that what they really want is equality of results. Occupy Wall Street, and its critics, were often arguing about equality. What does “equal” really mean? As the Supreme Court nears decisions on Gay Marriage and Affirmative Action, definitions are far from settled.

The debate is as old as the Republic, and no issue divided the country more than when, prior to the Civil War, Americans wrestled with the fact that slavery existed in a nation founded on the idea that “all men are created equal.” In *A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom*, Jeremy J. Tewell brilliantly surveys the running argument between North and South, and between Northerners and Southerners themselves, over what the Declaration actually meant; what slavery actually did and the ethical, moral, and legal repercussions—both past, present, and future, and for both blacks *and* whites—of slavery.

Tewell, who teaches American history at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, examined countless printed and newspaper sources to get a sense of the main currents of thought for Northerners and Southerners. He has written a very important book of political, social, cultural, and intellectual history that would be of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike. It is thoroughly researched, splendidly written, masterfully argued, and deserves the widest possible audience.

Tewell examines the multiple ways America's leading political, cultural, and artistic voices interpreted the Declaration, centering upon Indiana Democratic Senator John Pettit's 1854 speech declaring the phrase "all men are created equal ... to be a self-evident lie" (24). Stephen Douglas, though an opponent of slavery, argued that Jefferson never meant to include Indians or the Chinese as "all men." Well, what about Germans, Abraham Lincoln asked? After all, they were not "British subjects" in 1776—the criteria Douglas used to define "all men" (25). The Declaration, of course, carried no legal standing. "But it was an axiom adopted by the founding fathers to guide the nation in the future," Jewell argues (15).

"The thesis of this book," Tewell writes, "is that Northerners feared slavery, in part, because the rationales for black servitude were not inherently racial, and therefore posed a threat to the liberty of all Americans, irrespective of color" (3). Northerners, though often just as racist as Southerners, were above all concerned about the signal the expansion of slavery in the west would send about the value of labor— and the future of whites. To Northerners, "individual liberty, including the liberty of whites, depended on universal liberty (or at least the American people's continued devotion to that principle)" (7).

Chapter one, "The Myth of the Free State Democrat," examines the debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Both the northern and southern economic models needed to expand in order to prosper, and both looked west. Northern whites had no desire to have slaves take away their opportunities for work. As Lincoln elegantly articulated, the fate of slavery in the territories would define the nation's views towards the notion of freedom. Popular sovereignty, seemingly democratic, was in fact dangerous, and sparked vigorous debate. "I should like to know, taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it—where will it stop?" (23) Lincoln asked.

One of this book's many strengths is Jewell's discussion of how Southerners justified slavery. His subsequent chapter, "Inferiority," looks at the controversy generated by the main reason used for slavery. Northern Republicans countered by asking if other conditions warranted slavery: What about an inferior class? What about "inferior" siblings? What about the poor, the crippled, or those of low intellect? What about the Irish, so often portrayed in the era's mass media as a mere step above an animal? Jewell notes the contradictions within the

anti-slavery forces, many of whom also hated Catholics, and believed that blacks *were* inferior—though they stressed it was *because of* slavery, and was not a reason for allowing it. But because exact definitions of superior were so unclear, they posited, no one's freedom was permanently guaranteed. Northerners also feared, with ample justification, that slavery might be extended beyond agricultural work. An especially thought-provoking theme throughout *A Self-Evident Lie* is Jewell's history of the link between race and slavery, and how this past applies to a nation where so many slaves had substantial amounts of white blood in them. And when Southerners used history to defend slavery, Jewell reminds us, they failed to note that it was mostly *whites* who had been enslaved.

Chapter three, "The Good of the Slave," discusses the sense of moral superiority most Southerners brought to the slavery debate, and the fears of many Northerners, who saw slavery as a threat to whites. Most of all, Southerners had utter contempt for the northern economic model, and there existed no more prolific and ardent defender of slavery in this regard than Virginia's George Fitzhugh, profiled at length in a balanced and highly informative portrait. To those who believe Fitzhugh's views were not fully representative, Jewell convincingly argues that "one cannot dismiss the fact that his works were disseminated in the most respected southern journals ... were widely read and received fulsome praise from the most prominent southern reviewers. ... Northerners were not being overly disingenuous when they held up 'Fitzhughian' comments as evidence of southern designs" (61, 62). The Panic of 1857 only added to the southern argument that the northern model was no model at all. As Jewell notes, Southerners had always eagerly asked: if the North was such a paradise, why did it have far more beggars, and why did it produce so many reform movements—all those "isms"—eager to revamp their society?

In "The Good of Society," Jewell explains how, despite that only a fraction of the South's 1.5 million slaveholding families owned twenty or more slaves, slavery was crucial towards maintaining social stability. "In short, black slavery made southern whites feel better about themselves by obfuscating class divisions" (72). Jewell stresses that most of the South had universal manhood suffrage, giving political power to those who did not own slaves. An especially fascinating section is his examination of the southern use of both history and the bible, especially the Curse of Ham, to justify slavery, and the contradictions in each.

Chapter five, "The Slaveocracy," examines some of the central tenets of the anti-slavery argument: that the South exerted national political power far in excess of its population (seen most obviously in the three-fifths compromise); that slavery corrupted the character of slaveholders to such an extent, rewarding brutal and viscous behavior, that it corrupted the concept of "virtue" in the republic; and that slavery made a mockery of the value of hard work, damaging poor whites in the process, while also leading to excessive levels of income inequality—all of which did not bode well for the future of the Republic (87). These sentiments formed the core of the Republican Party's mindset. As Lincoln stated, slavery was based on the idea that "you toil and work and earn bread, and I'll eat it" (96). And to Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull, the Declaration was intended "to repudiate the idea of a superiority of birth," whereas the slaveocracy created an aristocracy that could pass on its privileges (98).

In "Southerners and the Principle of Universal Liberty," Jewell touches on the contested meaning of the American Revolution in the North and South, and how the Declaration was (and was not) commemorated. It contains an absorbing discussion of the use of racial imagery in antebellum banknotes, and a lengthy analysis of the Dred Scott case and how the decision clashed with principles set forth in the Declaration.

The concluding chapter, "Republicans, Northern Democrats, and the Principle of Universal Liberty," demonstrates just how thoroughly both North and South viewed themselves as carrying on the spirit of 1776—each defining themselves as opposing tyranny, each claiming to be on the side of the Founding Fathers. (Though Northerners, of course, were also split: "While Douglas viewed the Declaration as an endorsement of self-government for those of European descent, Republicans viewed it as a palladium of individual liberty, regardless of race" (124).) Included here is further discussion of how Americans chose to remember, and to forget, the Declaration. Jewell finishes with the 1860 campaign and its aftermath, ending with Lincoln's inauguration. "The preservation of American freedom," Jewell concludes, "would therefore depend on the American people's belief that the liberty of all men was a self-evident truth" (130).

The book suffers at times from excessive quotation: some of the quotes are rather lengthy; several of the block quotations could have been reduced; and occasionally a great many quotes are offered to prove a current of thought, when only a few could have proved the case.

But the written and oral material is just so rich and interesting that it is easy to see why the author could not resist including the many nuggets his research uncovered. Indeed, the author's wide variety of sources is remarkable, and his understanding of historiography is especially impressive. *A Self-Evident Lie* is a work of deeply original scholarship that demonstrates how strikingly often the language of those for and against slavery centered on vastly different interpretations of the Declaration of Independence.

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