

The Slaveholding Crisis: Fear Of Insurrection And The Coming Of The Civil War

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Review

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Paulus, Carl Lawrence *The Slaveholding Crisis: Fear of Insurrection and the Coming of the Civil War*. LSU Press, \$49.93 ISBN 9780807164358

Governance by Fear: The Politics of Insurrection

Expanding on Matthew Clavin's *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: the Promise and Peril of a Second American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), Carl L. Paulus's new book broadens the specter of servile insurrection in America, particularly in the slaveholding South. Planters and intellectuals in the South such as Edmund Ruffin linked territorial expansion of slavery with the avoidance of slave uprising and feared that Republicans would force slaves to abandon masters and flock to Republican "invaders" (p. 3), laying the groundwork for another Santo Domingo. Fear of black insurrection merged in the minds of these planters with the image of Republicans transforming northern states through insurrectionary slaves, and, with a sympathetic president from the North, refused to send troops and thereby encourage black rebels to burn down plantations and destroy the white racial hierarchy in the South across social spectrums. Thomas Jefferson's longing for an empire of liberty *and* territorial expansion that enslaved millions of blacks required dependence upon non-slaveholders. Even in the North, slavery in white South was at stake; therefore, whites across most of the South readily prepared for war rather than real or perceived abolitionism.

This book explains the horrors for many contemporary white antebellum Americans. It has surpassed the still useful *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (1970) by Steven Channing and incorporated the entire slaveholding South. Paulus both covered a series of atrocities by blacks and white alike in a book that reads like a civil war. Louis Moreau Gottchalk, virtuoso pianist, worried about potential black savagery in New Orleans because of the proximity of nearby: St. Kitts, Haiti, and Cuba. He watched as the black population in the South grew steadily. More broadly, stories of the Haitian Revolution seldom

subsided and at least undermined the thoughts of planters great or small. Gottchalk knew that whippings and whites' violence occurred often and were usually savage, and at any time or incident *could* rise up against whites. Masters remained vigilant. They had to when South Carolina and Virginia nearly outnumbered slaves in the 1790s. Benjamin Franklin created chaos in the House of Representatives when Congress petitioned to end the international slave trade. During that era, Americans feared that emancipation, or worse, insurrection, occurred, to the dismay of anti-slavery Quakers. Jeffersonian Republicans labored to distance themselves from the French Revolution and *universal* equality in their efforts to stop slave insurrection and that dangerous concept, the universal equality of the human race. Slave violence occurred at Point Coupee, Louisiana, in 1795 and plotted to attack local planters. French slaveholders used torture against them with whippings, getting dragged and tied to death, and many more died by hanging. Corpses were posted to strike fear into rebellious slaves. Patrols were similar in Virginia and South Carolina. Thomas Jefferson feared a slave uprising, as did men in Maryland and North Carolina. White Virginians doubled the forces of their state militias and feared two hundred or more slaves ready to torture whites. From Pennsylvania, Albert Gallatin was troubled by the idea of slave rapine, pillage, and massacre. During Gabriel's uprising in 1800 he walked the streets of Richmond and obtained iron tools in order to overthrow slavery in Virginia and plotted to kidnap Governor James Monroe.

Paulus noted that Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" adage paralleled Gabriel's "Liberté ou La Mort, " from the French Caribbean's independence. A harrowing dilemma spread across the nations' newspapers. Should publishers distribute newspapers that dealt with various aspects of slavery's horrors, lest they send violence and carnage into their minds? This problem vexed the Philadelphia *Gazette*. With or without newspapers, black rebels forced whites together from Massachusetts to Georgia to the point that many white Americans feared the destruction of democracy and the Union. For many, the idea of the death of the Union was at best precarious. When David Walker published his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in Boston, a thousand miles south a planter used extra security and demanded censoring abolitionists. President Andrew Jackson ordered his Postmaster General, Amos Kendell, to block attempts to stir slaves rebelliousness by publishing incendiary ideas.

Time, of course, escalated the situation. John Brown's antislavery fanaticism both in Kansas, and more so at Harper's Ferry, was stirred by the Haitian

Revolution. One of Brown's sons explained to correspondent to the *New York Times* that the body of Toussaint L'Ouverture slept in tombs, but his soul laid in the cabins of slaves, and the despots of America had to strike the first blow. They found the right person. John Brown took his war in 1859 and aimed to free the slaves across the nation in a bungled effort. However, he renewed the Haitian Revolution that was backed, among others, by the abolitionists who called themselves the Secret Six, although they did make a martyr of Brown and bolstered abolition. Brown's execution was received as either heroic and despotic depending not only blacks and whites. Abraham Lincoln became the commander-in-chief in 1861 and risked civil war. Slaveholders no longer wished to witness more conflicts over slavery. So did Lincoln. Virginian Edmund Ruffin took it upon himself to leave his beloved Virginia and head to South Carolina and a standoff between what would result in the Union and the Confederacy. Early on the day of April 12, 1861, the very radical Ruffin and others at Fort Sumter heard a tremendous explosion: the warning shot at union vessels. Ruffin took credit for firing the first shot at Sumter and Union Major Robert Anderson. Carl Paulus' richly rewarding book reminds that warfare, and those who engage in it, have always been in the eyes of beholders.

Eric H. Walther is a professor of history at University of Houston, Texas. He is the author of William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2006) and The Fire-Eaters Louisiana State University Press. He is currently working on concise biography: Harvey Milk: The Public Face of Gay Rights Politics.