

“Creber Procellis Africus”

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“Creber procellis Africus” – loosely ... a fierce storm blows from the south....

Thus, quoting the *Aeneid*, Senator Salmon Chase of Ohio attacked slavery and the Southern states.

It was February third, 1854. Chase was responding to Illinois Democrat Stephen Douglas.

Soon to become law, Douglas’s bill revoked the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and its restriction of slavery to below 36 degrees, 30 minutes north latitude – roughly the southern border of Kansas and Colorado. The Kansas-Nebraska Act would potentially open all lands west of the Mississippi to the “Slave Power.”

“It is Slavery that renews the strife,” Chase affirmed. *“It is Slavery that again wants room. It is Slavery, with its insatiate demand for more slave territory and more slave states.”*

But in quoting from the first book of Vergil’s epic poem, the Cincinnati lawyer unintentionally encompassed more than the national conflict over slavery.

The full verse reads:

“The winds swoop down upon the sea ... *Incubuerunt mari ...*, and from its lowest depths upheave it all – East and South winds together, and the Southwester, thick with tempests – and shoreward roll vast billows ... *et vastos volvunt ad litora fluctus.*”

Slavery was one of many issues tearing at American society in the 1850s like hurricane winds. For many people, however, it was not more important than others.

It was a time, in fact, much like our own.

One easy comparison would be between two young and eloquent politicians from Illinois who, without decent prologue, enter center stage.

First, there was Abraham Lincoln, a one-term congressman and railroad lawyer. Now, Barack Obama, a first-term U.S. senator and community organizer.

To some, each is the leader who will navigate a difficult course through stormy times to national reconciliation and success.

Viewed by others, each is an accidental president, lacking wisdom and experience. How inevitable, how purposeful, or how misguided will Obama seem to Literarians 150 years from now?

However, my greater purpose is to consider more substantial parallels between our own moment and the decade leading into the Civil War.

Those similarities contain valuable lessons.

Some people have too much history – the French, the Germans, the Russians, the Chinese....

But Americans, with our optimism, can-do spirit, and openness to experiment and change, have too little history ...or too little respect for it.

Memories evaporate. Lessons of the past sublimate into myth.

So, let's look at some of the great issues of the 1850s with the goal of learning from our history.

- First, there is an economy very much in transition, and greatly stressed:
 - At that time, yeoman agriculture and slave agriculture were giving way to an industrial economy....
 - Now, our world-leading economy is being savagely pummeled. Will General Motors, once the world's largest manufacturer, be in business next year?

It still seems the United States is becoming an information, knowledge, and technology economy.... But today's recessionary storm blurs everyone's vision.

- Then and now: The financial system is in crisis, with government bewildered, and impotent in dealing with failing companies, failing banks, disrupted credit relations....

How much real difference is there between banks collapsing in the Panic of 1857 because they had lent too freely, and banks failing today because of plummeting real estate values and defaulting homeowners?

- Second, immigration and religion:
 - Then, Anglo-Americans – almost all Protestants – violently confronted German and Irish immigrants, most of whom were also Catholic.
 - Today, Arab and South Asian immigrants, many of whom are Muslim ... as well poor Mexican and Central American immigrants ... are subject to a (perhaps) slightly more restrained prejudice.

- Third, there is fundamental disagreement on the role of the federal government in American society.

In this matter, the issue remains basically the same: How much power should the federal government have? How involved should government be in the financial system, in the economy at large?

The 1850s' most bitter conflict was over slavery, but it was very specifically over the role and power of the federal government in extending it, confining it ... or eventually abolishing it.

In the North, anti-slavery leaders believed the framers of the Constitution had given Congress the right to limit slavery to the original Southern states.

In the South, pro-slavery leaders equally firmly maintained Congress had no power at all to deny slave owners their right to take their property into new territories and states.

The debate extended into other matters. Specifically, what should the role of the federal government be in the national economy?

Before examining this question, let me return to the economy itself.

The Economy

Back in the 1850s, the American economy was booming. We were laying the foundation of what was to become the most dominant industrial ... and agricultural ... power the world has ever seen.

Thus, *The New York Times*, September 21, 1852, reported on the railroad network linking the Midwest farmers to East Coast population centers.

Under the headline *Views of the Western Railways*, a correspondent wrote:

The Central West is the garden of the Union. Cincinnati and St. Louis are the market houses of that garden....

Thirty years ago, the people of Connecticut got their flour from [New York's] Dutchess and other wheat Counties of the Hudson. Now ... Connecticut feeds on the flour of Ohio.

Ohio and other fertile Midwestern states harvested bounteous crops. They shipped their wheat and corn, along with herds of livestock, to the eastern cities ... and beyond to Europe. The good times were much like the boom of 2002-2008. Imports soared. Credit was easy.

Before the fall, then as now, came a couple of wars to further stimulate the economy, as wars often do. In our time, it has been wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with devil-may-care federal spending.

In the middle of the 19th century, it was, first, the Mexican-American War of 1846, and, then, the Crimean War.

War Inevitable!, pronounced the *Cincinnati Gazette*, on September 30, 1853 ..., and provided its readers this telegraphed report:

The steamer Washington arrived at New York yesterday afternoon bringing the intelligence that the Czar had rejected the Proposition of the Four Powers, as modified by the Sultan, and that war was, consequentially, considered inevitable.

...England and France are in honor bound and are publicly committed to support the Sultan.

Disrupting grain production in the Ukraine, the Crimean War absorbed Russia, Turkey, Britain, and France from 1853 to 1856. It was a further boon to Midwestern farmers.

By early 1857, times were so good the U.S. Treasury overflowed.

The new President – James Buchanan – boasted in his inaugural address:

Our present financial condition is without a parallel in history. No nation has ever before been embarrassed from too large a surplus in its treasury.

Does this bring back memories, ... perhaps of the large federal budget surpluses at the end of the Clinton Administration?

Does not Buchanan's enthusiasm sound extremely like "irrational exuberance?"

Such exuberance had Alan Greenspan – when he was chairman of the Federal Reserve – worried during the bull market and dot com bubble of the 1990s. And the exuberance returned with the housing bubble of recent years.

In fact, in the late 1850s, the farmers, merchants, bankers, and manufacturers of the North, were about to experience an economic collapse, much like today's.

For peace had been restored in Europe. Thus, in the summer of 1857, with grain production recovering in the Ukraine, foreign demand for Midwestern grain evaporated, and there was nervousness in financial markets.

Take it as an early example of the rip tides of economic globalization.

The panic began with a Cincinnati company – the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company.

Called to the bank's New York branch in late August 1857, President Charles Stetson finds the manager has been lending with a free and easy hand.

On August 24, Stetson locks the office doors. He announces:

The unpleasant duty has devolved upon me to state that this company has suspended payment. The event has mainly been brought about in consequence of making loans here to parties who are unable to respond at this time.

Stetson telegraphs the trustees in Cincinnati. That very day, they also shut down, with assurances to the public that Ohio Life has plenty of money and all will soon be well.

The bank will never reopen.

Ohio Life's demise was much quicker than those of, for instance, Lehman Brothers or Washington Mutual, but in essence the failures are the same.

In 2007, Washington Mutual – WaMu – a national leader in subprime credit, including subprime mortgages, announces it is in trouble. There is a run – a classic run on the bank, and Washington Mutual goes under.

In August 1857, depositors in New York banks, and elsewhere, start a run. Many banks fail. Suddenly, credit, which had been all too readily available, dries up ... for railroads, merchants, farmers, manufacturers. The financial panic metastasizes into a recession.

The recession hurt the North and Midwest more than the South. Because European demand for cotton and tobacco held fairly steady, the South suffered less.

South Carolina Senator James Hammond grumbled:

[The plantation States] should not submit to pay tribute for the support of any other industrial system than their own; much less to make good the bubble speculations of another section of the Union.

“Bubble speculations” That has a familiar flavor. Are we not, right now, embroiled in debate about responsibility for the bubble economy of the early 2000s? And assigning responsibility would place the blame – and the economic pain – on greedy Wall Street traders, or unconscionable bankers, in short, on someone, anyone else.

If ... if we had remembered ... and better learned the stormy consequence of a bubble economy, perhaps some restraint could have been exercised and the current financial crisis's hurricane winds subdued.

Immigration and religion

While economic boom and bust affected ordinary people as much in the 1850s as they do today, another issue really had more raw emotional effect.

That issue stemmed from immigration, and, with it, religion.

Immigrants, or people who are different from us....

To mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Americans, the annual arrival of hundreds of thousands of Irish and German seemed to threaten livelihoods, education, and society.

The two million immigrants in the 1840s increased the Union's population by ten percent. For comparison with today, let's take a very high figure of fifteen million illegal immigrants, primarily Mexican and Central American.

Nationally, that is less than five percent of our total population. But especially in states such as Arizona, California, and Florida, communities feel their schools, their social services, and their jobs are under siege.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the reaction to the Irish and German immigrants was even fiercer. Nativism infected the previously largely Anglo-American population. From Boston to New York, Philadelphia ... and Cincinnati ... the revolt was emotional, political, and physical.

In April 1855, one of the more violent riots exploded here. The quote Americans unquote ... or the Know-Nothing nativists ... imported 300 to 400 Kentucky sympathizers as their shock troops.

The *New York Times* reported:

The fighting between the Germans and Americans at Cincinnati, which commenced during the recent elections ... was renewed again yesterday [April 4th], and several additional lives were lost. The Germans were generally armed and fortified in houses. The Americans were also armed.

Rioters (railed the Times correspondent), if Americans, are a disgrace to the land of their birth....

If they are foreigners, the most effectual inducement that can be offered to decent behavior is one of sulphurous and leaden aspect....

Cincinnati was not at all unique.

[Pause]

Those maligned immigrants and their descendants have become, of course, mainstays of U.S. growth into a superpower. The lesson is obvious, but I'll state it.

Immigrants keep expanding and refreshing the positive, creative forces of change in our economy and society.

Next religion....

Today the targeted religion is Islam. In the mid-nineteenth century it was Catholicism.

Thus, the *Cincinnati Gazette*, March 28, 1853, indignantly reported:

The movement against our present Common School system ... is avowedly the movement of the Catholic Church.

It boldly declares the purpose of dividing the school fund, and distributing it to the different religious denominations to be applied to keep up sectarian, not Common Schools!

If we now have vigilantes – so-called Minutemen – watching along southwestern borders, and sheriffs, such as Phoenix's Joseph Arpaio, casting a wide net to round up illegal immigrants, in the mid-1800s we had Lyman Beecher, head of Cincinnati's Lane Seminary and father of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

He preached that Catholics and their Pope would stifle Americans' freedom.

Comparing America's *civil liberty* with the *despotic power* of kings and emperors, he thundered, *his holiness* is conspiring with those kings and emperors to undermine freedom in Europe and South America. And just as the Pope has directed *his cardinals and bishops and priesthood* to support despotism abroad, so will he do in the United States.

Were we to superimpose today's fears and furies over illegal immigrants and Islamic extremists, the terrorists of Al Qaeda, and religious fanatics of the Taliban ..., would we not find parallels that like railroad tracks appear to come together in the distance?

Differences on role of government in the economy

A third parallel between our situation today and the 1850s is rooted in fundamental disagreement over the role and the power of the federal government.

Currently, the debate focuses on how best to stimulate an economic recovery.

Should the federal government – the President and the Congress – inject hundreds upon hundreds of billions of dollars into the economy?

Speaking about his economic recovery plan, President Barack Obama has said:

... [A]t this particular moment, only government can provide the short-term boost necessary to lift us from a recession this deep and severe.

Or should the primary thrust be to cut taxes and free business from regulation?

Thus, Eric Cantor, Republican congressman from Virginia and House minority whip:

Our plan is really focused on providing tax relief to small businesses. ...[W]hen we weigh that against the attempts to borrow more money and spend it at the government level, I don't think there's any question as to what would result in more jobs.

A century and a half ago, the debate was different only in degree, not in substance.

Should the federal government be involved in financing such “internal improvements” as the National Road from Maryland through Ohio and Indiana into Illinois?

(Or was that a very early “earmark”?)

Northern Whigs supported using federal money for infrastructure improvements.

Jacksonian Democrats, especially in the South, were firmly opposed.

Should there be a national bank, such as Alexander Hamilton first created, to stabilize the currency?

The Jacksonian Democrats opposed the whole idea of credit and paper money. Whenever possible, they restricted the latter in particular.

An example of 19th century suspicion of paper currency were numerous laws seeking to remove smaller denomination bills from the money supply.

Ohio’s legislature passed such a law in 1840. The *Cincinnati Gazette*, March 31, 1840, commented sarcastically:

We are not surprised to find that the new anti-bank, anti-business act fails to make itself clearly understood by a portion of the community.

Its law lingo is sufficient to account for this. We shall attempt to strip its spirit of abominable but perhaps necessary tautological wrappage ... and give it transparent garb.

[It is] ... illegal to issue, circulate or receive as money or currency of a less denomination than five dollars – except for the purpose of redeeming such paper from circulation....

And the North generally favored higher tariffs to shield new industries from British and other European imports.

Not too much has changed in 150 years among many workers and industrial executives. They oppose free trade agreements such the North American Free Trade Agreement – NAFTA.

Last year, as a presidential candidate, Barack Obama said:

Trade deals like NAFTA ship jobs overseas and force parents to compete with their teenagers to work for minimum wage at Wal-Mart.

Many Republicans of the late 1850s would have been quite comfortable with that position. They urged protective tariffs to aid the North's new industries.

But today's Republican Party would find itself in complete agreement with mid-nineteenth century Southern Democrats.

Debating Obama last October, Republican presidential candidate John McCain declared:

I am a free trader.... The U.S. should engage in multilateral, regional and bilateral efforts to reduce barriers to trade, [and] level the global playing field

In October 1858, Senator James Hammond of South Carolina, a worthy successor to John C. Calhoun, declared:

Free trade is the test, the touchstone of free government. I have no hesitation in saying the plantation States should discard any government that made a protective tariff its policy.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the slave states were oblivious to the paradox of advocating free trade.

An 1857 letter writer in the Charleston, South Carolina, Mercury declaimed:

[No man] ... “*can be said to enjoy his full right in his own property, in the proceeds of his industry, unless he is at liberty to exchange it at the highest price he can get, in the best market he can find for the commodities of his choice.*”

That is, the fruits of a man's labor are by natural right his and his alone. Stripped to its essential core, that is the underlying idea of contemporary free-enterprise, anti-government theoreticians and politicians.

Milton Friedman and Friedrich Von Hayek are heroes –economic philosopher kings – of the free-enterprise, anti-regulatory policies implemented in the United States over the past quarter century.

Put them back into the 1850s. Would they not have concurred, in principle, with the South’s rejection of federal taxation, of federal regulation, whether it were of slavery or economic enterprise?

Even the striving for equality by means of a directed economy, said Hayek, can result only in an officially enforced inequality - an authoritarian determination of the status of each individual....

Although today we emphasize the immorality of slavery, in the 1850s the primary struggle was over the power and right of the federal government to control, limit, and even eliminate the South’s “peculiar institution.”

Northern political leaders – from Salmon Chase to William Seward, and later ... Abraham Lincoln – carefully crafted the position that the framers of the Constitution, including George Washington, deliberately, knowingly gave Congress full power to decide on when and where slavery would be permitted.

On the other side, Southern politicians argued the federal government – especially the Congress – had no constitutional right at all to do anything about slavery.

Salmon P. Chase was one of the first to construct the case that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the U.S. Constitution demonstrated the intent of the Union’s founders to corral slavery.

When, in March 1837, Chase first defended a fugitive slave and her rescuer he was only 29 years old, but had already practiced law for seven years in Cincinnati.

He argued ... futilely to be sure ... that Matilda Lawrence, housekeeper for abolitionist publisher James Birney, had been illegally kidnapped by a Missouri bounty hunter.

Chase defended fugitive slaves and their white rescuers so often he became known as the Negro attorney general.

Abraham Lincoln

It was, however, another anti-slavery lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, who spoke to the hearts and minds of ordinary people in the North.

I started this paper by comparing Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama's rise from Illinois politics.

Along their paths to the presidency of the United States, both men spoke to cheering crowds in Cincinnati.

In 1859, Lincoln toured Ohio.

On the evening of Saturday, September 17th, he spoke from the balcony of Edward and David Kinsey's jewelry store at 24 West Fifth Street.

(Approximately, that would be where today's downtown Macy's is displaying spring fashions.)

As was typical for political oratory of the time, it was a festive occasion. A company of horsemen and the German Brigade of the Tenth Ward escorted Lincoln from the Burnet House hotel .

Rockets greeted his arrival on Fifth Street, and a cannon – the Fourth Ward's cannon to be precise – was fired several times.

The cannon, the reporter from the Cincinnati Commercial commented drily, was evidently fired without regard to economy in powder, because after every discharge there was a shrill jingle of falling glass.

One reporter estimated the crowd at three to four thousand; another declared it to be six to eight thousand.

Lincoln's speech was relatively brief for the time – just two and a half hours. The *Cincinnati Commercial* headlined its report:

An Entirely New Speech!; Douglas Replied to!; the Northern Man with the Southern Proclivities Shown Up!; His Duplicity Exposed!

One hundred forty-nine years and some three weeks later, Barack Obama spoke to an equally enthusiastic, and certainly larger, Cincinnati audience, but without the fireworks or cannon salutes.

On the afternoon of Thursday, October 9th, 2008, some 15,000 people packed the central lawn at Ault Park to hear a shirt-sleeved Obama present his message of change.

The next morning the Cincinnati Enquirer headlined its story: *Democrat rolls through southern Ohio in bid to influence traditional GOP voters*

This paper has dealt with national issues and the similarities between the gales and storms of the 1850s and America today.

In this history, I believe there are useful lessons for handling our economic, social, and political problems.

Looking back on the chasm that developed in the 1850s between the economies and policies of the new Republicans and the sectional Slave Power, I fear ... as one, last comment ... that some of today's more conservative politicians are similarly fencing themselves in, throwing up barriers of ideology that will leave them similarly disconnected from the more powerful forces moving American society forward.

Everyday Concerns

But these big picture matters were often as distant then from the everyday concerns of ordinary people as they are today.

People focused then on improving their lives, earning a better living, creating a brighter future for their children.

Is that not the foremost interest of most Americans today? The nation is in the throes of a severe recession, but the great majority of working men and women are still going to their jobs Monday through Friday ... and planning their weekend activities.

Lincoln attracted a happy audience in September 1859.

Yet, if that Saturday night you preferred another form of entertainment, Polk's Opera House offered the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Comedians.

Performances included *the grand Fairy extravaganza of Fortune and his Seven Gifted Servants, after which a pas de trois Mazurka Imperiale by Annette, Charlotte, and Annie.*

Or, at Wood's Theater, corner of Sixth and Vine Streets, it was the last night of the *Star Sisters – Helen and Lucille in Little Katy or the Hot Corn Girl.*

The parquette cost 50 cents; the gallery, 25 cents.

And if you had business elsewhere, or a restless streak and were ready to move on ..., the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad advertised, *Cincinnati and St. Louis through without change of cars – Two daily for Vincennes, Cairo and St. Louis – The trains connect in St. Louis for all points in Kansas and Nebraska.*

And this past weekend, in today's Cincinnati, people went to the Cincinnati Symphony concert at Music Hall, or laughed as the College Conservatory of Music revived the musical version of Shakespeare's "Two Men from Verona.

Or ... they went to movies ... at \$9.50 a ticket ... perhaps to see "Mall Cop," "the first blockbuster of the year," or ... the comic book superheroes in "The Watchmen: The End is Nigh."

For that, too, is America, and our strong spirit in face of tempests from the east, from the south, or southwest....

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