

1950

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Recommended Citation

Doherty, Herbert J. Jr. (1950) "Union Nationalism in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol29/iss2/3>

UNION NATIONALISM IN FLORIDA

by HERBERT J. DOHERTY, JR.

I

Much has been written about the secession movement in the South, about the fire-eaters, the defenders of state rights, the evolution of theories to protect minority property rights, and the development of that sectionalism which is sometimes termed "Southern nationalism." Less is heard about Southern defenders of the Union-men who conceived of their national loyalty as devotion to the federal union rather than to a section. These latter men, it is true, were in a minority in the South, but they were usually men of wealth and position who were able to **make** their views known if not popular.

This latter school of thought is the subject of this paper. It is the purpose of this brief study to view the neglected writings of those Florida men who considered their loyalty to the South to be best served when defending the Union. In their pleas for moderation and their arguments for cautious action we see reminders of conservative traditional nationalists of earlier years and other lands-England's Edmund Burke, France's Vi-comte de Bonald, and Germany's Friederich von Schlegel.

There are many striking points of similarity between what Professor Carlton J. H. Hayes calls "traditional nationalism" and the pro-Union philosophy of such outstanding Florida conservatives as Thomas Brown, Columbus Drew, George T. Ward, and, above all, Richard Keith Call. These men were persons of wealth and property and were leaders of the conservative party of their day, the Whigs. They set forth an idea of traditional Union nationalism, and constantly bolstered it with references to the writings of great early American leaders and to past American history.

In their writings, their speeches, their actions, they constantly fought what they termed radical ideas, regardless of whether those ideas were of Southern or Northern origin. Basically, they had the same prejudices about Southern institutions as did the radicals of the South. These traditionalists, however, viewed these in-

stitutions as national in nature as well as Southern. They could not separate the idea of preservation of Southern institutions from the idea of preservation of the Union. They would resist change from either secessionists or abolitionists, and would preserve the Union as originally set up by the Constitution.

In the North this same attitude was bolstered by the leading propertied interests of the day. Daniel Webster was their outstanding spokesman. He condemned abolitionists and secessionists alike. He saw that civil strife would be to the detriment of propertied interests throughout the nation, and feared the consequences to Northern property which might result from the precedent established by radical measures against Southern property. These men, of North as well as South, viewed the federal Union as the handiwork of inspired men—as a delicately balanced system which had become sanctified with the years. To radically alter any part of that system, any of the institutions comprising it, would be to endanger or perhaps to destroy it. Their feelings of reverence for the Union as a permanent, unchangeable arrangement was akin to the semi-religious reverence which was exhibited by Edmund Burke when he wrote about the traditional English government. Among political writers, no one has expressed this idea of traditional nationalism clearer than has Burke.¹

Burke was obsessed with the inadequacy of individual reason, and accordingly was suspicious of abstract ideas, such as liberty, equality, and fraternity, in politics. He believed that abstractions assumed a degree of inventiveness which politicians do not possess, and a degree of pliability which institutions do not have. Institutions, he said, are not invented or proclaimed; they grow and embody in themselves the accumulated wisdom of a national group. Hence, they must be cherished, and changed only with caution, “for the planning and contriving politician, with venturesome, speculative plans for new institutions,

1. George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Henry Holt, 1937), p. 696.

can easily destroy what it passes his wit to rebuild." Old institutions work well because they are familiar, hence the plans of revolutionists to create new governments and new Constitutions seemed mad and tragic to Burke. These expressions of Burke's are ideas basic to traditional nationalism.

Compare these points with the writings of Thomas Brown, the governor of Florida during the sectional disputes of 1850, and note the striking doctrinal similarity. While those violent arguments of 1850 were raging, Brown wrote,

Nothing human is "enduring;" but under the smiles of Divine Providence, may we not hope for comparative stability in the provisions of that compendium of human wisdom — the Constitution of the United States.²

I do not wish to see another revolution, and if I feel called upon to blush in this connection it is for those . . . who would call a convention of modern politicians to remedy the inherent defects in the great Charter of our liberties—who think themselves able to improve it—who in respect to anticipated grievances would change or destroy it—and who seek to delude the people with dazzling schemes of a Southern Confederacy."

In these few words Brown expressed the greatest possible respect for traditional, established institutions. Here we see distrust of individual reason when directed toward altering those established institutions, as well as his contempt for the revolutionary who would invent new governments and new constitutions. Thomas Brown equals Edmund Burke in expressing a conservative nationalism based upon traditional institutions—institutions which express the national genius and which cannot be destroyed without gravely injuring the nation.

2. Sabine, *op. cit.*, p. 614.

3. *Pensacola Gazette*, (Pensacola, Fla.) Mar. 9, 1850.

4. *Florida Republican*, (Jacksonville, Fla.) Mar. 30, 1850.

If, as Rollin G. Osterweis⁵ suggests, we view the Age of Jefferson, the period of the Virginia dynasty, as the American Age of the Enlightenment, then we can also view the following period as the American Age of Romanticism. From the humanism and enlightened self interest of that earlier age, we shift in the Age of Romanticism to impassioned defense of sectional interests on the one hand, and unreasoning defense of the status quo on the other. This American Romanticism was marked by emotionalism, lack of intellectual discipline, and increasing sectionalism. Intellectual life became sterile, and the most important intellectual influence in the American South became the writings of the European romanticists.⁶ Byron's poetry, Moore's songs, Scott's novels, and selected writings of Carlyle and Michelet gave impetus to the romanticist atmosphere.'

Romantic Southern nationalism and traditional Union nationalism were both features of this romantic revolt against rationalism in the South. The romantic Southern nationalists were the Southern radicals—the secessionists who were so despised by traditional Union nationalists such as Call, Brown, and Drew. Under the leadership of South Carolina politicians and publicists, many of those radicals attempted to create the concept of a differentiated Southern culture. They attempted to portray a Southern nationalism built on the idea that the Southern people were a repressed cultural group striving for political independence in order to preserve that culture. These romantic nationalists also tried to steal some of the thunder of the Unionists by showing that custom and tradition were on their side as bulwarks of that Southern nationalism. Southern institutions, they said, were the historical expressions of the genius of the Southern people and had a differentiated background from Northern institutions.

5. Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1949). This is a study of romantic Southern nationalism.
6. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought, II* (New York : Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), pp. 30-31.
7. Osterweis, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

Many historians put much emphasis upon cultural differences as being responsible for Southern nationalism. If we agree with them we must admit that that nationalism was restricted to a very small group of the Southern people. Only the leisure class, the aristocrats, were influenced greatly by the writings of the European romanticists. Only the Southern aristocrat patterned his society after that of the European aristocracy. There were, and are, significant social and economic differences between North and South. Yet differences between social and economic groups within the South were often more marked than were differences between those of the sections. Some of the Southern groups had much in common with similar groups, all over the Union. For instance, there was much common ground between the small farmers of the South and the small farmers of the West, between merchants of the North and of the South, and between the professional groups of all sections. The traditional Union nationlists even found a great area of common ground for the big planters of the South and the industrialists of the North: both represented the major propertied interests of their sections.

A Southern nationalism did develop as the sectional disputes sharpened, but to attribute those disputes and the Civil War itself to the idea that a different nationality, demanding political independence, had developed in the South is difficult to countenance,

II

The romanticists who attempted to stimulate a cultural nationalism in the South were opposed by the Southern Unionists. These Unionists, for the most part, were conservative men of property who had not been carried along in the tide of romantic nationalism with their fellow Southerners for a number of reasons. First, and foremost, they feared that ideas of Southern nationalism could lead only to Civil War in which property would be one of the major casualties. Secondly, they hoped that slavery and other traditional institutions could be pro-

tected by concerted action on the part of the Northern and Southern conservatives. Thirdly, they had an almost religious reverence for law, order, and the sanctity of property rights. Those concepts were best protected by the Union, so they felt. Fourthly, they were usually Whigs in politics and looked to conservative nationalists such as John Marshall, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster for their inspiration. The Southern nationalists were usually Democrats in politics and took as their guideposts those writings of Thomas Jefferson which fitted their purposes. Finally, like conservatives the world over in every age, they were just downright opposed to any major change in the established order and way of doing things.

This has outlined in a general way the major characteristics of romantic Southern nationalism and traditional Union nationalism, and leads to a consideration in more detail of the writings of the outstanding traditional nationalists in Florida. Traditional nationalism usually holds that violent revolutions are unjustified and anti-patriotic, but it condones revolutions which reestablish traditional institutions. Reforms may be necessary, it concedes, but they must come gradually and as a national undertaking. The words of Thomas Brown which we have already quoted plainly bear out that thesis.

Brown further emphasized that point when a convention of Southern states was called at Nashville in 1850 to devise a remedy for *sectional* controversies. He feared that it would turn into a secession convention and flatly declared, "I consider such a convention as revolutionary in its tendency," and he added, "I most solemnly protest against it. The time has not arrived for such measures, and I pray God such a time may never arrive."⁸

Brown agreed that action should be taken if the traditional organization of the federal Union were to be shattered by some *act* such as the repeal of the fugitive slave law. If this led to a revolution it would be justifiable since

8. *Florida Republican*, Mar. 7, 1850.

it would be aimed at restoring the traditional order. When discussing this matter before the legislature, Brown said,

It is with inexpressible pain that the General Assembly and the Executive must contemplate any contingency imperilling the stability of a government which has, in general, so well and so wisely discharged its great functions, and which, like some proud monument tottering to its fall, seems to inspire a deeper sense of grandeur at the apparent threatening of a catastrophe; and while it menaces our safety, to call forth a more poignant sympathy and vivid recollection of the many grateful and hallowed associations which cluster around it.⁹

Columbus Drew, editor of the *Florida Republican* of Jacksonville, also spoke out strongly against revolution. Like Brown, he opposed the Nashville convention. Fearing that it might lead to disunion, he commented: "If such were the deadly purpose of the conclave, we would rather see it strangled in its birth than lend it countenance."¹⁰ Instead, he suggested, "Let the South resort to legal means to preserve its rights . . . Let us 'fling away' the idea of disunion. Let us not belie the principle for which our forefathers bled—that Americans are capable of self government."¹¹

The most violent critic of violent action was aging Richard Keith Call. Call, in his youth, had been a disciple of Andrew Jackson and a Democrat. As he grew older, he disavowed equalitarian democracy and aligned himself with all of the conservative, anti-secession parties: the Whigs, the Know-Nothings, and the Constitutional Unionists. In the decade before the Civil War preservation of the Union became the main theme of his life.

Unlike Brown and most traditionalists, Call seems to have believed that there was hardly any justification for revolution. In reference to the French Revolution of 1789

9. *Florida Senate Journal*, 1850.

10. *Florida Republican*, Jan. 24, 1850.

11. *Ibid.*, Mar. 21, 1850.

-an event somewhat before Call's time-he declared that it had been "mad . . . violating all law human and divine . . . shaking the foundations of all moral, social, and religious systems."¹²

During the controversy involving the nullification of certain federal laws by the state of South Carolina, Call had shown little sympathy for the South Carolinians and had congratulated Jackson on his disposition of the problem. Throughout the following thirty years he was a staunch Union nationalist and was outspoken in his condemnation of secession. When he was informed of the signing of the Florida secession ordinance in 1861 he bitterly replied, "You have opened the gates of Hell, from which shall flow the curses of the damned, which shall sink you to perdition."¹³

In 1861 Call sorrowfully wrote to a friend in Philadelphia,

The bonds of the American Union, the work of Washington, of Franklin, of Madison, and other great sages and statesmen of a glorious age, have been rent and snapped like cobwebs; and the greatest fabric of human government . . . has been destroyed in a few months—madly and rashly destroyed, without reflection.¹⁴

A second major feature of traditionalism was its anti-democratic flavor. It was basically paternal and aristocratic—another reason for its popularity with the slave holders of considerable wealth and property, Call emphatically upheld the aristocratic theory of government saying that "The theory of universal human freedom is the mad offspring of delusion and passion, and not the result of enlightened reason."¹⁵ Columbus Drew upheld the aristocratic idea in his editorial columns. When a.

12. Address of *Past @?-and Master R. I. Call*, June 24, 1859 (Tallahassee: *Floridian* and *Journal*, 1859).

13. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes* (typescript copy in Library of Florida History, University of Florida).

14. R. K. Call to J. S. Lattell, Feb. 12, 1861 (pamphlet form in Florida Historical Society Library).

15. *Idem*.

proposal was voiced in 1850 that the people of the District of Columbia be allowed to decide whether or not slavery should be abolished in that district, Drew sarcastically wrote,

Who are the "people" of the District of Columbia, and what right have they, as a community, to decree the disposition of the property of any of its members? Probably not one-twentieth of them are slave-owners, and by the terms of the resolution they would be forced to submit, through sheer weakness, to the will of nineteen-twentieths of the non-slaveholders.¹⁶

It seems natural that slave owners, as minority property holders, would oppose democracy when applied to property rights.

A third noteworthy feature of traditional nationalism is respect and affection for traditional institutions. These institutions are viewed as having grown or evolved, and as being expressive of the genius of a nationality. One supporter of the Whig party in 1850 looked upon that party, somewhat incorrectly, as being one of those traditional American institutions. In a letter which Columbus Drew placed prominently in his editorial columns the writer said,

The name of *Whig*, so strongly suggestive of *American Nationality*, is endeared by too many hallowed recollections and associations for us . . . to cast it lightly or contemptuously aside . . . Received at the baptismal fount of the Revolution, emblazoned on the aegis sustained by American troops at Yorktown, and bourne with affectionate pride by those who planned the Constitution and the Union, we have inherited and cherished the name of *Whig* as the token that designates the American patriot . . .¹⁷

The Constitution was regarded by Unionists as one of those traditional institutions. Governor Brown referred

36. Florida *Republican*, Feb. 14, 1850.

17. *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1850.

to it as that "compendium of human wisdom" and proclaimed, "The Constitution, that great charter of our rights, is sufficiently explicit to need even no formal resolutions to elucidate it."¹⁸ Brown further reasoned that since institutions embody the national wisdom, they must eventually reflect popular opinion and he concluded, "this fact, considered in connection with the manifestations of Northern sentiment upon their obligations under the federal compact, justifies a serious concern for the perpetuity of the Union."¹⁹

Using this concept of the Constitution as a national institution, many Southern traditionalists soon envisioned slavery as a national institution. That it was a national institution is precisely what Richard Keith Call believed. He said that slavery should be viewed

. . . not as an abstract question of right or wrong, not as a blessing or a curse, but as an existing reality, for good or evil, thrown upon us by inheritance from a past generation and another Government, and for which no man of the present day is in any manner the least responsible. It should be considered as it is, an institution interwoven and inseparably connected with our social and political *system*, and as a domestic institution of the States, and a *national institution, created by the American people and protected by the Constitution of the United States*. It should be considered as an institution which *cannot Be disturbed* in its *present* political relation to some of the States of the [Union] . . . *without great detriment* to all, and without, perhaps, *destruction* to some one of the parties to *this* relation, It should be considered as an institution which *could not now be abolished, even with the consent of all, without fatal consequences to some of the parties holding relations to it*²⁰

18. Florida Senate Journal, 1850.

29. *Idem*.

20. R. K. Call to J. S. Littell, Feb. 12, 1861.

Where can we find respect for established institutions which exceeds that expressed by Call for the institution of slavery.

In Call's discourse upon slavery we also see reflected the fourth great tenet of traditional nationalism. That, is, that the state is a partnership between living, past, and future generations; hence it should be permanent, since its ends cannot be accomplished by any one generation. In one manner or another, every prominent Florida Unionist upheld this fundamental of traditional nationalism. Thomas Brown expressed the debt to the past when he caused to be engraved upon Florida's stone in the Washington monument the following inscription: "Florida sees in his counsels safety-in his life an example-in his memory a perpetual bond of Union." Brown further elucidated upon this theme in his inaugural address when he declared,

And now is the period when the Farewell Address of Washington ought to be published by every patriot editor, and caused to be read in the family of every patriot father. It comes to us now, as the warning voice of the Father of his country, from the spirit land.²¹

Brown best expressed this partnership idea when he wrote to Joseph Clisby, editor of the Tallahassee *Sentinel*, in regard to the crisis of 1850,

... may North meet South and South meet North and say "let there be no further strife between us—let that mantle of our fathers fall upon us, and let us, all unite in one glorious, fraternal, and patriotic effort to transmit unimpaired to our children, those blessings which have come down to us from a common ancestry."²²

Columbus Drew expressed similar sentiments in his editorial columns when he said that the people "love the

21. Florida *Senate Journal*, 1850.

22. Florida *Sentinel*, (Tallahassee, Fla. 3 April 2, 1850.

Union for themselves, for the ancient haloes which encircle it, and for the benefits it will confer, despite gloomy prophecy, upon our posterity.'"²³

Thus we see by specific examples that the Unionists of Florida were, in so far as their theory is concerned, traditional nationalists as surely as were Edmund Burke, Vicomte de Bonald, or Friederich von Schlegel. That they were consciously disciples of these European traditionalists, we do not contend. Very probably they assumed that their defense of the federal Union was original political reasoning. What they did was to express opposition to a change in the *status quo* in terms usually employed by conservative interests. These terms—disgust with violent revolution, distrust of democracy, admiration for established practices and institutions, and an evaluation of the established system as a partnership of past, present, and future—were best formulated by Edmund Burke in the 18th century into a doctrine which political theorists call traditional nationalism.

After the dissolution of the Union, most of the Florida Unionists gave at least their nominal loyalty to the Confederacy. In this respect, too, were they justifiably following the precepts of traditional nationalism; for the, European formulators of that doctrine all held that regionalism was traditional and thus national, and that the nation should respect and foster it. Governor Brown, in his inaugural address, expressed this unusual concept of loyalty to a region as well as a nation when he said, "There is no public officer who will defend the sovereignty of the States, the rights of the South, and the compromises of the Constitution, with more firmness and devotion than I will. I would say to all who would be disposed to violate those sacred rights, 'thus far shalt thou go and no farther.'"

Call expressed this dual loyalty as early as 1833 when he had declared, "I am opposed to the doctrine of nullification." He stated, "But while I sincerely express my devotion to the principle of state rights, as defined by the

23. *Florida Republican*, Feb. 21, 1850.

Constitution, I confess I am nevertheless devoted in my attachments to the Union. I consider its preservation as the last hope of happiness and prosperity for a great and gallant people.’’²⁴ When war finally came Call found himself severely criticised for the statements which now appeared to many people to be treason to the South. At the age of seventy he lashed out at those persons with all the invective at his command. In one letter he bitterly wrote that he who “questions my fidelity to the South [is] a fool, or a wilfully malicious lying scoundrel.’’²⁵ He promised to give prompt “satisfaction” to any who might question his motives.

The Civil War effectively stopped the efforts of the Florida Unionists to prevent violent disunion. General Call died a broken hearted old man before the war ended.. Governor Brown went into retirement and died in 1867. Columbus Drew accepted a minor post in the Confederate government and sank into obscurity. George T. Ward, whom we merely mentioned, died on the field of battle fighting for his State which he had tried, even in the secession convention, to keep in the Union.

24. *Floridian*, (Tallahassee, Fla.) April 17, 1833.

25. R. K. Call to T. J. Perkins, Mar. 19, 1862 (Call collection, Florida Historical Society Library).