The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities is pleased to publish these scholarly and thoughtful presentations by Paul Beckworth, Bakersfield College Professor of History, and Michael Harvath, Bakersfield College Professor of Economics. The presentations were part of a panel discussion on November 16, 2011, on the 150 anniversary of the Civil War.

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Sincerely,

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Was Slavery Inevitable in the American South?
Michael Harvath

What was the cause of the Civil War? The man who thought about this question more deeply than anyone else probably ever has finally answered it this way, “One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.” This is from Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address in 1865, as the Civil War neared its end.

If this is true, then I believe that what economics has to add to a discussion about the inevitability of the Civil War is to help us understand if it was inevitable that the United States would end up with the two opposing systems of white based free labor in the north and black based slave labor in the south.

Colonial America suffered from a shortage of labor from the start. The amount of land to be worked gained by, shall we say, ‘convincing’ Native Americans to leave grew faster than natural population growth could provide new workers. And almost from the beginning this demand for workers was filled by slave labor. But it wasn’t what you are thinking. These slaves were voluntary slaves, and they were white. They are more commonly known as indentured servants.

America had plenty of farm owners looking for workers, and England had plenty of poor would-be workers looking for jobs and the chance to get some land of their own in the New World. The only problem was most of these workers, being dirt poor, couldn’t afford the passage over. The common solution was these people would make a deal with a ship captain in London or a port city for him to provide free passage on his ship to America. And in return, when the captain got there, he could sell the person into slavery for an agreed upon period of years, at the end which the now free servant got a suit of clothes and a monetary bonus, called his “freedom dues”. And while this arrangement might seem odd to us, I dare say there are some students who would look with favor upon a deal in which Apple would pay their education and living costs till they got their degree in software engineering, then they worked for Apple for no pay except for living expenses for 4 years.

There was still black slavery, but it was a minor labor source, and it was mostly evenly spread out over the whole country. For the decade 1670-1680, net migration into the northern British colonies was 93% white, and migration into the southern colonies (Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina) was 90% white. Most of this small number of black migrants were slaves, but not all. The largest source of migration is the white servants coming to work the tobacco fields of Virginia.

This is not to say that black slavery was not important in the New World, it was, but not in North America, but in the Caribbean. The new arrivals into Barbados during this same decade are 75% black slaves. Why the difference? Barbados actually started with mostly white indentured servants too, but that didn’t last long.
Barbados, like most of the West Indies islands quickly became a sugar producing colony. And it turns out that slavery in these West Indies sugar colonies was like the end of Hamlet ... everybody dies. It's done in low wet lands and the disease rate is very bad. It didn't take the prospective temporary white slaves back in England long to decide they didn't want to go there.

But it wasn't only the dying thing. In addition to quickly discovering the most profitable crop to grow was sugar, the land owners in Barbados quickly discovered the most profitable way to grow it is something called “the gang system”. The gang system divided the many interactive complex tasks necessary to plant a crop like sugar into smaller simple tasks performed by a group of cooperating slaves. Here it is described in operation by James Debow's Review of agricultural and industrial progress from 1857.

“1st, the best hands, embracing those of good judgment and quick motion. 2nd, those of the weakest and most inefficient class. 3rd, the second class of hoe hands. Thus classified, the first class will run ahead and open a small hole about seven ten inches apart, into which the second class drop four to five ... seeds, and the third class follow and cover with a rake.”

And of course modern ears, hearing this, think “assembly line”. And so it was, the agricultural equivalent. The problem with it is that workers did not like it at all. The industrial revolution, which will ultimately beat down workers until they have accepted their role as cogs in a regimented machine lies in the future. Given a choice, workers would not, and did not, choose this life.

Luckily for us, if we are trying to avoid slavery, tobacco is not easily grown with the gang system. It is a more delicate crop than sugar, requiring more individual care. So the indentured servants will still come here, and the cost-benefit analysis of the tobacco farm owners is that the servants are cheaper and grow tobacco just as well. An American of 1680 would have predicted Lincoln's world of large number of black slaves localized in the south to be unlikely at best.

So what happened? Things got better. Not here in America, back in England. The English economy grew, British workers got more money in England itself, and now they weren't so keen on risking their lives on a perilous boat journey to North America for the privilege of being whipped for 4 years, at least not without getting higher freedom dues.

Meanwhile, in the Caribbean, things are getting worse. Too much sugar has been made, driving down the price of sugar and thus the demand and price for slaves.

Servants are a little more expensive, slaves are a little cheaper. Just enough so that black slave labor begins to win. The migrant white indentured servants growing tobacco in Virginia and North Carolina, and rice in South Carolina and Georgia are replaced with migrant black slaves. And while it took a long time for indentured servitude to completely die out, this switch to black slaves as the primary labor source happened with surprising speed. For the decade of 1680-1690, migration into the northern colonies was almost unchanged from 10 years earlier at 94% white; but black migration into the southern colonies jumped from 10% to 41%.

Why does this happen only the southern area? What about the north? The New England states were not importing any people at this time, white or black. They were already full to the brim with people. Those puritans married young and had done away with all sources of fun except for one, and as a result they had been breeding like rabbits for 40 years before we get to this crucial time of 1680.

Further south, Pennsylvania still had both a plentiful supply of cheap land and grew the same crops that workers in Europe grew, most importantly wheat. While the rise in income in England and Germany meant that fewer people felt the need to become indentured servants, it did mean more could afford the trip on their own. Those immigrants coming to America wanted a place to use the skills they already had to grow crops they already knew, and that meant Pennsylvania and the states around it. The labor buyers loved it. Here was a source of labor you didn't even need to pay to come over. That was cheaper even than depressed slave prices.
As for Pennsylvania, so for New York to a lesser extent. And why grains in the north and tobacco and rice in the south? If you look at a map of climate zones of the United States, you will find that the demarcation line for a humid subtropical climate (best for growing cotton) almost perfectly marks what will be the border of the Confederacy.

By 1776, to pick a date at random, things have stabilized into the pattern that we are all aware of - free labor in the north, slave labor in the south. But the pattern is not yet set in stone. Slavery's victory in the south, while complete, is also narrow. Slave labor growing tobacco is a little more profitable than free labor, so everyone does it; but that still could change, if the factors that caused its victory in the first place change. People can believe the various schemes continuously being proposed to send the African slaves back to Africa and recreate the world of 1680 might actually work.

Up till now I have been able to tell the story of labor in America without saying the word that is most associated with slavery in America, and that word is cotton. That is because up till now cotton has actually been a minor crop in our economy. A few people are trying to grow it, but, boy, it takes forever to separate those cotton fibers from their seeds.

But in 1794, Eli Whitney patents his cotton gin. Now making cotton makes sense. Cotton is great for slavery. There is a world-wide demand so production can grow almost without limit, it uses the gang system in a very productive manner so slave labor leaves free labor in the dust. Now there is no turning back.

In the run-up to the Civil War, the abolitionists argued strenuously that slavery was not only ethically wrong, but that it was economically inefficient, kept in place primarily because of racism and love of power. They told the southern slaveholders that would be better off getting rid of their slaves and replacing them with free workers. The slave holders replied, "You're crazy." Because we really, really want to believe that what is morally the right thing to do will also be the best thing do to, and because the victors write the history book, for a long time it was conventional economic wisdom this was true. One of the leading economists of the age, J.E. Cairn wrote at the start of the Civil War in a book called The Slave Power that "majority of those who sell the cotton crop" were "poorer than the majority of our day-labourers at the North".

We now know this was not only wrong, but really wrong. Small southern farmers with 1-7 slaves were about equal in wealth to the average northern farm, with both being more wealthy than a day-laborer. But once you look at all the cotton belt farms, including the big ones, the great wealth tied in with cotton farming becomes clear. To be the owner of a big cotton belt plantation was to be one of the truly successful in America. Nearly 2 out of every 3 males with estates of $100,000 or more lived in the South in 1860. In the '1 percent' of 1860, the factory owners in the north were outnumbered almost 2 to 1 by the gang system cotton plantation owners in the South. And further down the line, the per capita income of the free population in the South was just a little higher than per capita income in the North, and was growing faster.

What does it mean to say that something is historically inevitable? That's actually a growth industry in history right now, with multiple books about 'alternate histories' having been written recently. And of course science fiction has always been interested in the question of what is immutable and what can be changed.

I think the most fruitful way to look at this is through probability. Looked at from various times, how likely is it that an informed American thinks the future will be the Lincoln's world of southern concentrated black slavery?

From the founding of the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown Virginia in 1607 to 1680, our informed American would think it unlikely. Slavery, at least black slavery, is a minor labor source and spread out over the country rather evenly. There is no obvious reason that should change and the most recent immigration patterns would give no hint it is about to.

From 1680 to 1800, that world has become our most likely future. Black slave importation rises sharply, but only in the south. The main economic reasons for this are falling sugar and thus falling slave prices, rising indentured servant prices, and a strong preference among free white European immigrants for jobs in wheat growing areas. But this trend can conceivably still reverse itself, if the price changes that caused it in the first place reverse themselves.
After 1800, I don’t see any branching points that get us away from a world of localized southern black slavery. It was, to use a word, “inevitable”. The cotton gin and the gang system have just made slavery too profitable in the areas that grow it. Part of the reason for the raising of voices in our politics as the 1800’s progress is perhaps the increasing realization that there is no way out, thus we feel compelled to yell ever louder that there must be.

Of course to say that because the U.S. is doomed to two very different labor/social systems is not to say it is doomed to civil war. Some might say that if only the voters and politicians show reasonable prudence and common sense, that war can be avoided. Others might say that to say war can be avoided if only the politicians show good sense is just another way to say that war is inevitable. I will leave that discussion to my fellow panel members.

I think the part that economics plays in the discussion of this question, “Was the Civil War Inevitable?” is that it sets the game board on which the game will be played. The specific moves the players of the game then make will be determined by their culture, politics, and ethics; but they can not escape the general rules and starting position of the pieces. By the early 1800’s, the main controlling fact of American politics is that economics has localized slavery in the south and made it very profitable there. American politicians could no more escape that rule than a chess player can escape the rule that bishops move diagonally.

If you wish to read further, let me recommend these 3 books, the first 2 of which are where most of the ideas and numbers of this talk came from. All are available at Amazon.com

White Servitude in Colonial América by David Galenson. A book that is both a straight-forward empirical study of the title subject, and a haunting glimpse at an America that almost was ... one in which the Civil War could never have happened.

Without Consent or Contract - The Rise and Fall of American Slavery by Robert Fogel. It is not easy for an economic historian to win the Nobel Prize in economics. Most other economists do not consider it ‘cutting edge’. But when you take hold of a 100 year consensus that slavery was an inefficient, out-of-date system, held on to mostly because of racist stubbornness and turn it around to make people see it was thriving, efficient means of production, you catch the attention of a lot of people.

American Slavery and American Freedom by Edmund Morgan. If you think that behind simple, bland statements such as ‘because of falling slave prices, the tobacco farmers of Virginia switched from white to black labor’, there are probably lurking things like riots, armed rebellions, and power struggles between the Church and the Royal Governor; you are right. Mr. Morgan has all the gory details, along with one of the more interesting takes on the great Paradox of America: How did the most effective writers and fighters for freedom that ever existed in America come from a slave state?
The Morality of Slavery & the Slave Holder's Disbelief in Their Peculiar Institution

Paul Beckworth

Was the Civil War inevitable? That is a tough question to answer. Perhaps another way to put it is "did the Civil War need to happen?" Did this nation need to come to death grips in order to expunge the scourge of slavery? Did we need a war between brothers so that we might be the *e pluribus unum* kind of people who so many thought we could be? Rather than say the war was inevitable or not, I say the war was needed. The war was, to twist the old term, "a necessary evil." It was the War Between the States that ended slavery: No Civil War, no 13th Amendment, no freedom. Contrary to beliefs among southern apologists in the Reconstruction era, slavery was not "on its way out." It was eradicated only after 640,000 Americans lay dead in their graves that the slave became a person. Southerners, my great-great uncles Hansel Beckworth and Jeremiah Beckworth included, fought valiantly for four hard years for their freedom and their "way of life," a southern euphemism for slavery. Ultimately, that "life" changed, and not just for southerners. Not only had the Civil War freed the slaves and altered the south, but it had saved and utterly redefined the entire nation. It was the Civil War that created "The" United States, and eradicated "These" United States. Secession became a dead letter, and soon enough we became not Virginians, New Yorkers or Floridians, but Americans, one and indivisible... not quite an ethnicity but maybe something more than just a nationality. So, while the inevitability of the Civil War is up for debate, I think the necessity for it is not. My colleagues have done a masterful job of explaining the economic, political, and cultural forces that helped drive the nation into a bloodbath. Now, I must tackle the morality of slavery, which is no easy task.

For Americans today, steeped in teachings on equality, such a task would seem on the surface to be extremely straightforward: "It's wrong!" However, for slave owners of the antebellum south, it was equally as straightforward to them: when it came to color, equality did not exist. And they unapologetically wrote, spoke, preached, and taught about slavery: "It's right!" That is the moral concept I wish to deal with tonight; the Southern defense of slavery. Did they really believe their own rhetoric? Did the enslavers of men, the rapists of women, the destroyers of families, the traders of human beings really believe what they were doing was right? Did they really? I mean, they wrote that it was, they preached that it was, they gave long eloquent speeches that it was, so it should be an open and shut case that they truly felt this way. But is it? I do not think so. It seems that sometimes their actions did not necessarily follow their words; that perhaps they had deceived themselves into thinking their slaves liked being... well... slaves. As a result of this thinking, many slave owners were honestly hurt when their loyal slaves ran off to freedom, deserting their masters and mistresses. How did this way of thinking come to be so? That belief system began in the 1830s.
By the time of the Civil War, slavery was called a "positive good"; but before the 1830s it was seen as a "necessary evil." Except for South Carolina and Georgia, slavery came slowly to the British colonies of North America. The British 1625 census for Jamestown showed 23 blacks. By the 1650 census there lived only 300 blacks out of a total population of 30,000. By the 1720s, slaves in the thirteen colonies numbered 78,000, the number then leapt to 263,000 by 1754, a huge leap. By the time the Revolution began, slavery had entrenched itself in the colonies if not in the colonists' minds. It had been a slow, subtle growth before the 1750s explosion, but there it was. Slavery in the midst of freedom. The paradox was often ignored or grudgingly acknowledged by the slave owners who refused to answer the query of British essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson in his pamphlet Taxation No Tyranny: “How is it that the loudest yelps for liberty come from the drivers of men?” The plantation owning class appealed to their freedom to have slaves as a right of liberty. Infringing on those rights would be a violation of the very freedom they fought the British for. Even so, some slave owners freed their slaves on republican principles after the war.

In a burst of revolutionary zeal, a number of slaves were manumitted after independence was achieved in 1783. Washington had allowed slaves to win their freedom by fighting for the colonists; although, South Carolina and Georgia voided that order within their own borders. Up to 50,000 slaves gained their freedom as a result of the war. Even before the Revolution, slaves could be freed for "meritorious service" in Virginia (Virginia Assembly 1723), a nod to the superiority of freedom over slavery.

One of the ideas that permeated the "necessary evil" position was self-preservation: If the slaves go free, they will turn on us. As the tortured, freedom-loving, slave-owning, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Holmes in 1820, “But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” We don't like it, but we don't want a race war on our hands, either. He spoke very plainly of the immorality of slavery but very openly of its necessity. But decades before he wrote some of his more strident denunciations of the institution he could not part with himself. (1785)

*The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other... Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.*

To put it another way, "If we don't straighten up, we are going to pay." Needless to say, not many southern slave owners echoed his prophetic utterances in 1861.

Another of the ideas that permeated the "necessary evil" position was the economics that Mike Harvath spoke of. The belief was that the economy would collapse without slave labor in the South. With the invention of the cotton gin, the need for slaves dramatically increased, as did their value. Slavery was rejuvenated thanks to the cotton. So, instead of dying a slow death after the Revolution, it miraculously picked up its bed and walked, then ran into a new era, the “positive good” era.

The shift from the view of slavery as “Hey, we don’t like but we need it,” to “Hey, this is good for all involved,” can partially be attributed to three events: the Missouri Compromise, Nat Turner’s Rebellion, and the sudden rise of abolitionist attacks on the South’s peculiar institution.

First, the Missouri Compromise. As the nation pushed west, it had made sure to keep parity between the slave states and free states. Missouri, or Missoura, with its desire to come into the Union as a slave state set off a rather visceral reaction in the North. The issue was at once political and moral. As a result of the compromise, Maine came in as a free state, solving the political issue of parity. Morally, however, Southerners stood on the thin ice of “necessary evil,” which even they recognized as a poor logic for the spread of slavery as far north as Missouri. For example, the northern border of Missouri was only about 250 miles from Chicago! A change in thought was required as the South doggedly dug in its heels in defense of its rights.

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Another reason for the shift to slavery as a “positive good” occurred in August 1831 when Nat Turner, inspired by prophetic visions and holy signs as well as an Old Testament view of retribution and justice, led a terrifying slave revolt. Over 60 whites were killed in order for Turner to help bring about the Day of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10). Whites were deathly afraid, as they should have been, of a slave rebellion. When it finally happened, this helped lead the South into defending slavery even more.

The third reason for the “positive good” idea of the South is the rise of abolitionism. The Quakers had led the charge for some time, well before the Revolution. The Liberator, started by William Lloyd Garrison in 1831, the same year of Nat Turner’s Rebellion, was a no compromise vehicle calling for the end of slavery. Abolitionists used Holy Scripture and the call to conscience to take the slave holders to task. To attack the integrity of the slave holders demanded a response, so that is what the Southerners gave them. These three events pushed the slaveholding South to abandon its now obviously weak justification for slavery for a more robust defense.

Perhaps the most well-known presentation of the new “positive good” argument was that of former vice president John C. Calhoun in 1847. He famously said before the U.S. Senate in 1837:

In few countries so much is left to the share of the laborer, and so little exacted from him, or where there is more kind attention paid to him in sickness or infirmities of age. Compare his condition with the tenants of the poor house in the more civilized portions of Europe—look at the sick and the old, infirm slave in the midst of his family and friends, under the kind superintending care of his master and mistress.

This speech echoed Governor George McDuffie’s speech to the South Carolina state legislature two years earlier. As would be expected of a South Carolinian, McDuffie pulled no punches when he wrote that the Negro is destined by God to be in a slave condition. It is marked on the face, stamped on the skin, and shown by his intellectual inferiority. The capacity to enjoy freedom is a gift from God bestowed on those as a reward of merit. Obviously, the merit based ability to enjoy freedom fell to whites as a gift from God, not to the black skinned, inferior slave.

So, Hobbes’ natural rights of man was out; Aristotle’s natural slavery was in. Some lesser people, in this case blacks, are natural slaves and that was that, nothing to feel bad about. This shift was not necessarily a celebration of slavery, though it could be interpreted as such, but it was a blatant challenge to the North to try and knock that proverbial chip off its Southern shoulder.

Much of the southern defense of slavery and “positive good” lay with the Bible. If God wanted no slavery, He would have commanded no slavery. Yet, there it was in the Hebrew Law; the Jews were allowed to have slaves. Leviticus 25 set down guidelines for slavery. The Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, did not say to abolish slavery but actually told slaves to obey their masters in Ephesians 6:5 and again in Colossians 3:22. He did not even tell Philemon to grant freedom to his newly Christianized slave Onesimus. Needless to say, abolitionists spoke of Christ’s universal message of philo love and the commandment to love God, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). Obviously, to them that meant slavery ran contrary to the spirit of Christianity, if not the letter.

Now, the trouble I see for the slave owners is this: the same Bible they say defended slavery is also the same Bible they absolutely didn’t want the slaves to read. If masters wanted the slaves to accept Christianity, it was only as a form of control, not as a path to freedom. But others saw that Christianity, in a vague and hard to define way, made slaves more perverse, less amenable to discipline, and more discontented with their lot. Or, as one put it, made them “saucy.” While masters were looking at the Israelites being allowed to have slaves, the slaves of the south would have been looking at the rescue of the Hebrew slaves after 430 years of slavery from the hands of a cruel, corrupt pharaoh. Their view of Leviticus 25 would have been on the Year of Jubilee, when all the captives were set free. Abolitionists and slave owners bickered over what the Bible meant. Who had the final
word? According to the tongue-in-cheek answer of Dr. Noll of Wheaton College, “It was left to those consummate theologians, the reverend doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what, in fact, the Bible meant.” The slave owners, by not wanting the slaves to know too much of the Bible, showed their wariness of the Good Book to defend their cause.

If slavery was such a “positive good” for master as well as slave, and the black man was truly a natural slave, why were whites so fearful of a slave revolt? If blacks recognized that “their” whites were only there to take care of them, why be afraid that those thankful blacks might creep up the stairs in the middle of the night and do them bodily harm? The constant fear of uprisings led to slave patrols and constant vigilance, backed up by what we would today call a gun culture. While not every southern man had a gun, there was certainly more of a need for one down south than up north. Make no mistake, southern slavery could not exist without the unlimited use of force.

What about the love shown to the slaves, the paternalism of the masters and mistresses? To be sure, there were heartfelt feelings, usually between the house slaves and the white family who owned them. However, as Eugene Genovese masterfully pointed out, the masters had to love so they could deny to themselves that they were the ones causing the suffering of their slaves. Therefore, every time a slave went against his master, it struck at the heart of the master’s moral self-justification and his self-esteem. It was intellectually impossible to come to terms with slave resistance. Masters fumed at the slow intellect and laziness of slaves, never letting themselves believe the slaves were slow and lazy as a form of resistance against them. The slaves used the whites’ racism as their own weapon! Long after the war a South Carolinian wrote of the planter class, “An unconquerable pride grew in the hearts of this class - the pride of unchallenged domination, of irresponsible control of others, of unquestioned power, of uncriticized conduct.”

When slaves left their masters during or after the war, the masters were shocked, hurt and angry. This may seem like an argument for the slave owners believing their own “positive good” rhetoric. They wrote of insolence, ingratitude, treachery, and traitorous slaves. But were they surprised or simply angry that their free labor and way of life, the good life, was no more?

I would like to think that in the very early days of slavery there existed among the first or second generation of slave owners a fight of conscience. I want to believe that the first time a master beat a slave to a pulp, had forced sex with a slave, or sold a child away from his mother that he couldn’t sleep that night. I want to think that he couldn’t stop staring at the ceiling thinking to himself, “This is wrong. I shouldn’t have done that. God forgive me.” I want to think that there were so many mulattoes working in the Big House because the white father felt guilty. While not openly acknowledging the child as his own, he at least quietly did so.

While defenders of slavery wrote masterfully and massively on the issue of slavery, little philosophical debate ever emerged among the descendants of slavery about the merits of the south’s peculiar institution. Today it is somewhat impolitic to make moral judgments about another person or society. As historians we must put everything into context. Yes, yes, yes, definitely. However, a slave getting whipped in 1850 does not need a smart-alecky history professor from Bakersfield College telling him it’s all about context. A slave mother who has just been sold away from her baby does not need an economist to tell her she is part of a larger system of trade. I believe that oppressed people have a more acute sense of right and wrong than the oppressor. For slaves, redemption and retribution were definitely two Old Testament concepts they believed in. They could echo the prophet Jeremiah’s lament that man’s heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

Was the Civil War inevitable? Ahh, yes, I think so. Was it necessary? Absolutely. It was only then that the freed slaves could sing:

No more auction block for me. No more, no more.
No more drivers’ lash for me. No more hundred lash for me.
No more auction block for me . . .
Many thousand gone.

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