

# The True Purpose of the War

by Robert Lewis Dabney

---



We all know that the professed purpose of the war party was to preserve and restore the Union over all the States. But the disclosures made above by Colonel Baldwin of the aims of the head of that party, are sufficient to prove that the real purpose was for other than the pretense – to enlarge and perpetuate the power of his faction. This had just seized the reins of Federal power by an accident, being in fact but a minority of the American people. This people had condemned it to a righteous exclusion from power for forty years. Its leaders were weary, envious and angry with their long waiting, and hungry for the power and the spoils of office. These cunning men were fully conscious that their tenure of power, won by luck and artifice, would be precarious and brief. The old party of Federal usurpation and centralization had dubbed itself, by a strong misnomer, the Whig party. The people, at ten presidential elections, or congressional issues, had rejected their project. At length, despairing of victory by its old tactics, it had thrown itself into the arms of the later born and despicable party of the Abolitionists, who had at last succeeded in their purpose

of raising, in numerous States, their designed tempest of fanaticism. Thus the older and larger party gave itself away to the younger, smaller, and more indecent one; and by this traffic the two had won in November, 1860, an apparent success, so far as to make its leader a minority President. The manipulators well knew their dangers from "the sober second thought" of the American people. It was but too probable that the elements of justice and conservation, unfortunately divided in 1860, would reunite in 1864 to restore the *Constitution*. Hence, "had they great wrath," because they knew their time was short. They knew that something more must be done to inflame the contest between fanaticism and conservatism, or glorying would be short.

The hasty secession of South Carolina and the six Gulf States, although justified by the avowed revolutionary sectionalism of the new party in power, gave them their coveted opportunity. The conspirators said to each other, "Now we have our game. We will inflame fanaticism and sectional enmities by the cry of Union and Rebellion, and thus precipitate a war between the States. *Inter armor silent leges*. Our war will be short; for we believe these Southern slavocrats much more boastful than valiant; and, chiefly, we will paralyze their resistance by lighting the fires of servile insurrection, plunder, arson, rape, and murder in their rear. But this short war will suffice for us, to centralize Federal power, overthrow the *Constitution*, fix our high tariffs and plutocratic fiscal system upon the country and secure for ourselves an indefinite tenure of power and riches." Such were precisely the counsels by which such leaders as Senator Pomeroy, Mr. Thaddeus Stevens, Governors Morton, Curtin, and Andrews, *etc.*, hectorated the ignorant and vacillating chief of their party into war, against the advice of real Union men North and South, and especially against the views of his own Premier, William H. Seward. This man, while the most unscrupulous of traffickers, and the chief architect of the new faction, knew well, as did all statesmen and constitutional lawyers, that the *Constitution* gave the Federal Government, the creature of the Federated States, no right to coerce the seceded States, its own sovereigns and creators. He was older than his supplanters in his own faction, and however unscrupulous, was too much imbued with the precedents, principles and feelings of the older and better days, to bring himself at once to the atrocity of kindling a war between the States; hence, Mr. Seward had adopted the smoother and wiser policy. He had induced his chief to make an ambiguous deliverance in his inaugural, March 4, 1861. He believed that he would be able so to direct the plans of his presidential tool as to make him adhere to the pacific policy. But he was mistaken. The more forward and heady conspirators gathered in Washington, wrested his tool out of his hand, and turned it against him.

These new advisers were aware that a Federal executive had no more constitutional or legal right of his own motion to attack a seceded State, than the poorest constable in the most obscure township. But they were in too much haste to wait for the semblance of authority from a congressional force bill, unauthorized and flimsy as such a semblance would be. Nor did they feel certain that even their rump

Congress would be persuaded to enact a war against sovereign States no longer in the Federation, nor represented in their body, nor subject to their jurisdiction. The Senators and Representatives of seven States would be absent; but those of the great Union-loving Border States, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Arkansas, would be present. Such a rump Congress might indeed include a number of the admirers of Andrew Jackson, but they would be too just and clear sighted to claim the precedent of his force bill of 1833 against South Carolina, even though they did not regard it, as true history will, as the mere expression of a tyrannical temper and of personal hatreds in that famous renegade to the principles of the party which elected him. For that force bill was directed against a State which claimed to be still in the Union, while nullifying within her own borders an unjust Federal law. It was wholly another thing for the Federal Government to declare war against seven seceded States, no longer under their authority, but withdrawn from it by sovereign acts more formal and legal than those which had made them parties to the Union. Therefore the conspirators saw that a war must be precipitated without the semblance of law, and against law and the *Constitution*. By what expedient? By that of an audacious and gigantic lie! They knew that in fact every step and act of self-defense taken by the seceded States had been an act of formal, legal statehood executed by the constitutional authorities, the same, to-wit, which had first made those States members of the Federal Union. But they would impudently discard this great fact and call those actions illegal riots, the doings of insurrectionary individuals assembled against the law. They would reply upon the hot arrogance of triumphant fanaticism and the revival of passions which they themselves had "set on fire of hell," to overlook this essential difference. Thus they would seemingly bring this terrible usurpation of their President under the scope of his authority to enforce laws and suppress illegal violence. So he was made to begin his famous war proclamation of April, 1861, which made the most dreadful strife of modern times, with a stupendous falsehood. On that foul foundation rest all the subsequent crimes of coercion and reconstruction.

That this war was made, not to preserve a constitutional Union, but solely to promote the aims of a faction, is confirmed by these further facts. Its purpose was clearly betrayed by the final reply of Mr. Lincoln to Colonel Baldwin's noble appeal for conciliation: "What, then, will become of my tariff?" He might as well have said out aloud, that he was making this war, not to preserve a Union, but to enforce his projected high tariff. Next, every thoughtful man, North and South, friend or foe of the Union, knew perfectly well that the Montgomery Confederacy of seven States must be short lived if it remained alone without the border States. If I may borrow a new term of finance, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to "freeze out" this weak association. By giving them a useless independence, making them feel the inconveniences of separation, and holding peaceably and steadily before them the benefits and protection of the old, just constitutional Union. So Mr. Seward knew; and on this belief his policy was founded. So the Virginian statesman and ardent lover of the Union, Alexander H. Stewart, assured Mr. Lincoln. So Colonel Baldwin; so ex-Governor Morehead, of Kentucky. My point is then, that the seven seceded States could have been brought back with certainty by pacific means. For the Union, no war was needed. It was made solely in the interest of the Jacobin party.

Secessionists and Union men alike knew that the Montgomery Confederacy could not stand, without the accession of the great border States. But the latter were still firm friends of the Union. They judged, like the secessionist, that the abolition and free-soil movement was sectional, mischievous, insulting, and perilous; but they had calmly resolved not to make it a *casus belli*, wicked as it was. They had distinctly refused to go out of the Union on that issue. They pledged themselves to support Mr. Lincoln loyally and legally, though not the President of their choice, and to conciliate the seceded States provided the crime of coercion was forborne. But they assured Mr. Lincoln that this usurpation and crime would infallibly drive them, though reluctant, into the secession camp. This made it perfectly plain that peace meant a restored Union, while war meant disunion. But the Jacobins needed a war for their own factious ends. There was nothing they disliked so much as a Union peaceably restored. Therefore they preferred the tactics which would insure war, and that on the most gigantic scale, rather than peace and union. Their problem was how to make sure of the spilling of blood. Thus while those patriotic and union-loving statesmen, Messrs. Stewart and Baldwin, were pleading with Mr. Lincoln not to coerce, because coercion would precipitate certain disunion and a dreadful war, they were producing upon the cunning and malignant minds of the Jacobin leaders a conclusion exactly opposite to the one they desired. Those minds said to themselves, "Just so; therefore we will coerce, because it is war which we crave, and not a righteous Union."

The history of the peace-congress affirms this explanation. It will stand in all history to the everlasting glory of Virginia, that she proposed this assemblage, as a special agency for harmonizing differences and restoring a true Union. She sent to it her wisest patriots, irrespective of party, headed by the great ex-

President, John Tyler, illustrious for his experience, purity, courtesy and fairness. But the Jacobin leaders had resolved that there should be no peace; and this without waiting to see what terms of conciliation might be found. It is an historical fact, that definite instructions went forth from their head in advance, that the efforts of the Peace Congress must be made abortive. The motive was not concealed: that the partisan interests of the Jacobins were adverse to such a peace. Other leaders as Senators Chandler, of Michigan, and Wade, of Ohio, *etc.*, declared with brutal frankness, that the case required blood-letting, instead of peace. Therefore, this last effort of patriotism and love for the Union was an entire failure.

The withdrawal of the seven States from Congress left the Jacobins a full working majority during the months of January and February. They had everything their own way in Congress. But every effort for peace and union made by the patriotic minority, represented by Senator Crittenden, of Kentucky, was systematically repelled. Even when the compromises proposed were transparently worthless to the South, they were refused. The final word of Jacobinism was, "No compromise at all, fair or unfair, but absolute submission, or war and disunion." The utmost pains were taken to teach the border States and the friends of the Union that they should have no terms save abject submission to such constructions as the Jacobin party might see fit to put upon a rent and outraged *Constitution*. The proof is complete.

Argument is scarcely needed to demonstrate that the infamous reconstruction measures were taken, not in the interest of a true Union, but of this Jacobin faction. For their architects brutally disdained to conceal their object. For instance, one of their leaders, Alban Tourgee, in his *Fools Errand*, expressly declares that the purpose of reconstruction was to elect another Jacobin President, otherwise jeopardized by the reunited Democracy, through the help of the negro suffrage. And he declares that the project was short-sighted, and destined to ultimate failure. Mr. Tourgee has here slandered his brethren. Their reconstruction measures, in their sense of them, were an entire success — and did just what they designed — helped them to elect a series of Jacobin Presidents and to fix their parties and policy upon the country. True; those measures placed the noblest white race on earth beneath the heels of a foul minority constructed of a horde of black, semi-barbarous ex-slaves and a gang of white plunderers and renegades. It infected the State governments of the South with corruption and peculation. It injected into suffrage, in the Southern States, a spreading poison, which gives a new impulse to the corruptions of the ballot, already current among themselves, so that the disease is now remediless. But what did the Jacobins care for that? They had gained their end, more Jacobin Presidents, more class legislation, a sure reign for the plutocracy.

According to Mr. Lincoln's theory, a State could not go out of the Union, and any act of secession is *ipso facto* void and null, being but the deed of an illegal riot, and not of a legal body. Hence all the States were legally in the Union throughout and after the war. Hence, when armed resistance ended, nothing was necessary to reinstate the so-called seceding commonwealths to their full Federal status, except their submission to the chastisements and the changes laid down for them by the will of their conquerors. The subjugated States had all made that submission humbly and absolutely. Nothing should have been wanting, therefore, to reinstate them, except the witness of the Chief Executive of these facts. That witness had been borne expressly and fully by General Grant himself and the President.

Mr. Lincoln's man Friday, Andrew Johnson, now President by the accident of murder, continued to stand precisely upon his master's avowed platform. Why not? The whole coercion party professed to set on it! The war had been fought through upon that pretended platform. Why should not Andrew Johnson simply reinstate these chastened sisters in the Union, by his executive action especially, seeing they had never been out of it, could not be out of it, and had fully accepted their chastisement? But that simple course meant the following result: *The war Democrats of the North, rallying the Southern people to themselves, would elect a Democratic President!* There is the whole rationale and cause of the infamy and treason of reconstruction. And this explanation stamps the whole war, with all its butcheries and miseries as a gigantic lie; and this result has given a perfect justification to every measure of resistance taken by the States assailed. Such was the final judgment of that Union-lover and reluctant Confederate, that great Christian soldier, Robert E. Lee, as he went down with stately yet tragic steps, towards the tomb and the judgment bar of the omniscient and holy God, in whom he believed.