

The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832¹

Reviewed by Major Nolan T. Koon*

*Our Negroes are flocking to the enemy from all quarters, which [the enemy] convert into troops, vindictive and rapacious—with a most minute knowledge of every bye path. They leave us as spies upon our posts and our strength, and they return upon us as guides and soldiers and incendiaries [for the enemy].*²

Introduction

In his latest work, Alan Taylor³ crafts a thoroughly researched and detailed account of slavery in Virginia during the years following the Revolutionary War and through Nat Turner’s bloody revolt.⁴ Drawing principally upon primary sources,⁵ he recounts the often overlooked stories of runaway slaves who joined the British navy during the War of 1812. He also highlights the hypocrisy of a Virginia society that fervently embraced and espoused principles of liberty and equality, while it simultaneously perpetuated and protected a system of slavery.

Throughout the work, Taylor alludes to, without fully exploring, other interesting narratives. For instance, recognizing that their contradictory societal system was unsustainable politically, philosophically, and practically, many prominent Virginia statesmen, nevertheless, refused to seriously consider emancipation. Notwithstanding that some questions remain unanswered in this masterful work, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832* (*The Internal Enemy*) is an excellent and well-written historical account of this dark time in American history and well-deserving of its numerous accolades.⁶

The Internal Enemy’s Main Points and Ideas

In 1812, the United States declared war against Britain for, among other reasons, impressments of American merchant sailors into the Royal Navy. At the outset of hostilities, Britain recruited a handful of runaway slaves to serve as guides and pilots for its Chesapeake littoral campaigns.⁷ British naval officers eventually freed thousands more slaves. Approximately 3,400 runaway slaves obtained British sanctuary and freedom by paddling to “freedom’s swift-winged angels” (i.e., British warships).⁸

Taylor paints both a broad and a meticulous description of race, slavery, and politics in Virginia circa the War of 1812. Although the breadth and the scope of his endeavor may arguably obscure some points, his main ideas are threefold. First, he provides individual accounts of runaway slaves who fled the yoke of their masters for the promised freedom of British vessels. Second, he describes the incongruity and dichotomy of a Virginia agrarian economy built on slave labor and a societal system allegedly principled upon liberty and equality of *all men*. Third, he depicts a Virginia population utterly consumed by fear of a perceived internal enemy and an imminent murderous slave revolt.

Critique of The Internal Enemy’s Main Points

Inhumane Treatment of Black Virginians

In poignant detail, Taylor weaves together individual stories to form a tapestry detailing the cruel maltreatment of slaves. He recounts brutal beatings with clubs and whips to increase productivity and profit.⁹ Most emotional are his accounts of families torn asunder by the sale of loved ones. Some plantation owners desired to maintain slave families, but their aspirations were frequently superseded by economic interests.¹⁰ Owners also sold slaves and family members as a form of punishment.¹¹ A female slave who

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¹ ALAN TAYLOR, *THE INTERNAL ENEMY: SLAVERY AND WAR IN VIRGINIA, 1772–1832* (2013).

² *Id.* at 286.

³ Alan Taylor is a history professor at the University of Virginia and has written ten books regarding early American history. He has won the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes for his prior publications.

⁴ On the evening of August 21–22, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner led a small slave rebellion and killed approximately 60 white Virginians. TAYLOR, *supra* note 1, at 414–15.

⁵ Taylor draws significantly upon the following: letters from runaway slaves to their former owners; slave owners’ claims for remuneration for runaway slaves; and newspaper articles and other publications from the time period.

⁶ In addition to numerous glowing reviews, *The Internal Enemy* was a 2013 National Book Award Finalist and a 2014 Pulitzer Prize winner.

⁷ TAYLOR, *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁸ *Id.* at 3.

⁹ *Id.* at 63.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 60.

¹¹ *Id.*

suffered numerous whippings and whose husband was sold years before, declared that, “[s]elling is worse than flogging. . . . My heart has bled ever since [my husband was sold] . . . but my back has healed in time.”¹²

The racial oppression faced by blacks is interlaced throughout and is a foundational theme of *The Internal Enemy*. If this were Taylor’s *only* thesis, his work would not add anything original to existing scholarly research; however, he uses it to introduce and then to underscore the hypocrisy of the Virginia establishment. It is in this endeavor that Taylor truly shines and demonstrates his expertise to wed narration and history.

Duplicity of Virginia Society

Taylor excels when affording the reader insight into the complexities of a nascent America filled with revolutionary zeal and egalitarian ideals. In the Declaration of Independence, America proudly pronounced the following to the world: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹³

Taylor masterfully exposes the shameful irony of a plantation society that consciously refused to extend these fundamental rights to enslaved blacks. After consoling a ten-year old child who had been separated from his mother, one sympathetic master rationalized that slave labor “supported, rather than contradicted, the freedom of those *who most deserved it*.”¹⁴ Countless instances such as this formed a “tragic contradiction [of] promoting greater equality for white men while weakening the security of black families.”¹⁵

Not all Virginians were blind to the duplicity of their political beliefs and their slave system; yet, even reasonable men came to embrace the status quo as a necessary evil to ensure the economic livelihood and survival of whites. “Otherwise honorable men sustained an exploitative and encompassing economic system dedicated to property in humans, the pursuit of profit, the rights of creditors, and the interests of heirs. Seeing no other choice, most Virginians maintained slavery as their duty.”¹⁶ As one slave owner lamented, “Surely, the Virginians are not barbarians. Habit may make them forget the . . . daily horrors which pass under their eyes.”¹⁷

Other Virginians supported slavery because of fear. They believed that if Virginia freed blacks, the “emancipated would try to destroy their former masters.”¹⁸ Although Thomas Jefferson believed in gradual emancipation, he conditioned their freedom on their deportation to Africa. Believing former slaves and whites could never live together as equals, Jefferson declared the following: “We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.”¹⁹

Notwithstanding, the reader is left perplexed regarding why Virginia adamantly clung to slavery. Economics and racial bigotry can only be a partial justification. Britain, which also struggled with these same considerations, had enthusiastically abolished the slave trade.²⁰ The British prime minister praised abolition as “one of the most glorious acts that had ever been undertaken by any assembly of any nation.”²¹

In the time after the Revolution and leading up to the Civil War, the New England states and the Federalist Party attempted to limit the expansion of slavery into new territories.²² The abolition movement gained momentum with religious groups such as Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists.²³ Even some politicians from western territories openly questioned the practice of slavery as an extension of class warfare.²⁴ They viewed it as a luxury of wealthy eastern landowners—especially as slavery inched the country to war. Complaints swirled that the “rich man’s war had become the poor man’s fight.”²⁵

During this time period, some of Virginia’s social and intellectual elites publicly supported an end to slavery—or at least questioned the morality of its practice. “The leading Patriots recognized the gap between their soaring ideals and their sordid practice of slavery.”²⁶ A prominent plantation owner, lawyer, and statesman, St. George Tucker commented that, while America fought a war for freedom, “We were imposing upon our fellow men . . . a slavery ten thousand times more cruel than . . . those grievances . . . of

¹² *Id.* at 59.

¹³ U.S. CONST. art. I, § 8, cl. 8.

¹⁴ TAYLOR, *supra* note 1, at 59 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 83.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 9.

²⁰ *Id.* at 115.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 153.

²³ *Id.* at 36.

²⁴ *Id.* at 153.

²⁵ *Id.* at 154.

²⁶ *Id.* at 35. Regarding the practice of slavery, Patrick Henry wrote that it was “as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the bible, and destructive to liberty.” *Id.* Notwithstanding, Henry never freed his own slaves because of “the general inconveniency of living without them.” *Id.*

which we complained. . . . Should we not have loosed their chains?”²⁷

If this historical work has a substantive blemish, it is that it does not answer the following question: In the face of such political, social, religious, and moral objections, why did Virginia fail to act rationally with respect to slavery? The presumption is that the majority of Virginians would have made a decision based on a cost-benefit analysis. How were Virginians able to so effortlessly ignore the moral and religious objections? Did they underestimate the emancipation movement? Did they inflate the social and economic costs associated with ending slavery? Did their fear of free blacks obfuscate their analysis?

Perhaps there is no adequate historical explanation regarding why Virginia chose to cling to slavery in the face of such moral, political, ideological, and religious currents. Regardless, the irrational decision of Virginia and the greater South would eventually lead to their folly and the Civil War—as well as a slave insurrection that took shape on British warships and returned to America in red coats.

Virginia Society Feared a Bloody Slave Revolt

With remarkable writing dexterity and astute insight, Taylor pieces together seemingly unrelated events to show a complete picture of a complicated period of history. He goes to great length to dispel Virginia’s macabre specter of an indiscriminate murderous slave revolt. He then brings the reader along step-by-step to demonstrate how the insurrection so feared by Virginians took on an unanticipated form.

“Virginians imagined a dreaded ‘internal enemy’ who might, at any moment, rebel in a midnight massacre to butcher white men, women, and children in their beds.”²⁸ It’s true that there were isolated incidents of insurrection and violence. In 1800, for example, a skilled blacksmith and slave, Gabriel, recruited and organized 500 men to march on Richmond and seize the governor’s mansion.²⁹ However, the plot largely fell apart when, on the night of the operation, inclement weather washed away roads and bridges to Richmond.³⁰ In 1831, Nat Turner led approximately 60 slaves in a bloody one night rebellion in Virginia.³¹ Regardless, the massive slave revolt that gripped Virginians’ imaginations never transpired.³² The wife of a congressman

reported the following: “Through the mercy of providence we have once more escap’d the horrors of a Massacre.”³³

Early in Taylor’s work, the reader is left to speculate why there was no massive slave rebellion in Virginia during the War of 1812. According to other historians, the small size of Virginia plantations and the small number of slaves (relative to whites) made large-scale insurrections impractical.³⁴ Consequently, the struggle against slavery by blacks often took on the form of individual and daily acts of resistance.³⁵

In the latter portions of his book, though, Taylor shows that resistance took another form. British Admiral George Cockburn, organized 450 liberated slaves into the Colonial Marines, a battalion of formidable and disciplined fighters. “The Colonial Marines responded so well . . . that [Admiral] Cockburn . . . claimed he preferred them to his own marines.”³⁶

Rather than recount particular battles or acts of heroism, Taylor movingly recounts the personal bonds formed between British naval officers and their new allies. In doing so, the reader is afforded a glimpse into the complexities of human relationships in times of war. British officers frequently accompanied freed slaves back to their former owners’ plantations in order to liberate and reunite family members.³⁷ When former owners demanded the return of their slaves, the British officers, who felt honor bound, resolutely resisted and “stood firm in protecting the refugees.”³⁸ In another historical account of slavery and the War of 1812, *The Slaves’ Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812 (The Slave’s Gamble)*, Gene Allen Smith documents instances where the British admiralty ordered intensified attacks on the American shoreline.³⁹ These operations did not have a military objective; rather, their sole purpose was “to protect the desertion of the Black Population.”⁴⁰ Taylor uses these episodes to allude to an irony of history: during a war started because of their impressment of Americans, the British Empire and Crown—not the newly formed democracy of the United States—

²⁷ *Id.* at 35–36.

²⁸ *Id.* at 7.

²⁹ *Id.* at 96.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 414–15.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 133.

³⁴ Eric Foner & John A. Garraty, *The Reader’s Companion to American History*, HISTORY (1991), <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery-iv-slave-rebellions>.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ GENE ALLEN SMITH, *THE SLAVES’ GAMBLE: CHOOSING SIDES IN THE WAR OF 1812*, at 104 (2013).

³⁷ TAYLOR, *supra* note 1, at 337.

³⁸ *Id.* at 338.

³⁹ SMITH, *supra* note 36.

⁴⁰ TAYLOR, *supra* note 1 at 108.

found themselves on the right side of liberty and equality for all men.⁴¹

Though Taylor does not address the fact that the War of 1812 afforded free blacks and slaves a profound choice, it is the focus of *The Slaves' Gamble*, which is an excellent companion piece. “[T]he war provided an unparalleled chance for slaves and free blacks to join the side that promised freedom or advancement, and they ultimately played the competing powers against one another in the attempt to secure this promise.”⁴²

Not all free blacks and runaway slaves chose to fight for the British. For instance, in 1813, Charles Moore, who was a runaway slave, volunteered to join the American navy. Moore was not alone in his decision; blacks comprised approximately fifteen percent of the American navy.⁴³ One interesting question posed by Smith’s research, and absent from Taylor’s is, did free blacks and slaves have an American identity and fidelity that motivated their decision to fight for their country? As noted by Smith, the answer to this question is an inherently complex and personal one, a function of infinite variables.⁴⁴

Conclusion

“The War of 1812 gave Virginians a great scare, revealing the military potential of black troops deployed against them. Long a specter, the feared internal enemy had become real in the red coats of British troops rather than as the anticipated murderous massacre at midnight.”⁴⁵ Despite not fully examining some interesting questions, Taylor excels at shedding light upon this often overlooked aspect of American history. It details the social, political, and economic complexities surrounding slavery during the War of 1812. No doubt these complexities contributed to the dichotomy of a Virginia society that simultaneously embraced both the practice of slavery and the principle of equality.

Finally, although the book is a historical accounting regarding slavery in Virginia during the War of 1812, Taylor offers the following caution: “Slavery reveals how anyone, now as well as then, can come to accept, perpetuate, and

justify an exploitative system that seems essential and immutable. After all, we live with our monsters.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Britain was bemused by the hypocrisy of American political ideals in light of its sordid practice of slavery. British officers often mocked “American republicanism as tyranny perfected rather than as liberty protected.” *Id.* at 140.

⁴² *Id.* at 6.

⁴³ *The War of 1812: Black Sailors and Soldiers in the War of 1812* (PBS television broadcast Sept. 1, 2014), <http://www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/black-soldier-and-sailors-war/>.

⁴⁴ SMITH, *supra* note 36, at 6.

⁴⁵ TAYLOR, *supra* note 1, at 398.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 83.