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Jefferson Davis and Proslavery Visions of Empire in the Far West

Snatching odd moments during sentinel duty at Fort Fauntleroy in New Mexico, William Need penned an urgent message to Secretary of War Simon Cameron in September 1861. Thousands of miles from the killing fields of Manassas, Virginia, where the Union army had gone down in defeat several months earlier, an equally ominous development was unfolding along the borderlands of the American Southwest. “The Texas rebels and Arizona cut-throats, like the ancient Goths and Vandals, are at the very gates,” threatening the entire western half of the continent, Need warned. That threat was especially dire, he added, as the territory lacked both the means and the will to beat back the rebel invaders. Indeed, New Mexico had been in the hands of proslavery military and political forces for years, and now, with Confederate secession, a longstanding southern plot to capture the Southwest seemed nearly inevitable. To ascertain the nature of rebel ambitions in the Southwest, Need wrote, Cameron should look no further than the Confederate chief himself. For more than a decade, Jefferson Davis had coveted the region, especially Arizona, “his beau ideal of a railroad route to the Pacific.” The region, Need continued, “was to him the terra incognita of a grand scheme of intercommunication and territorial expansion more vast and complicated than was ever dreamed of by Napoleon Bonaparte in his palmiest days of pride and power.”¹

Need’s fears were justifiable. And his assessment of Jefferson Davis’s western ambitions was hardly exaggerated. Beginning shortly after the U.S.-Mexico War, Davis directed his attention beyond the Mississippi and articulated a sweeping proslavery vision of empire in the West, a vision that would have grave consequences for the deepening political crisis between North and South. Perhaps no antebellum political figure had such a decisive impact on American development in the Far West. As a senator and secretary of war, Davis steered the antebellum debate on the transcontinental railroad, helped orchestrate the last American land-grab of the period, introduced a camel corps to the Southwestern desert, and

paved the way for the major overland mail route to the Pacific. Then, as the Confederate commander in chief, he channeled his political ambitions into military objectives, authorizing several invasions of the Southwest during the war.

Most biographies of Davis skate over his Trans-Mississippi ambitions, just as most histories of the sectional crisis overlook proslavery operations in the Far West. Davis's role as Confederate president has served as something of a historiographical vortex, obscuring his contributions to the nation's march westward before the war.² More generally, there has been surprisingly little written on proslavery visions of empire in the Trans-Mississippi West. Although an excellent and growing body of literature—from the works of Robert May to Walter Johnson and now Matthew Karp—has enriched our understanding of antebellum southern imperialism, the focus of this scholarship is largely confined to the Atlantic Basin.³ Deservedly, the dramatic episodes in proslavery empire-building—such as the multiple attempts to seize Cuba and William Walker's short-lived slaveholding republic in Nicaragua—have attracted their share of historical scrutiny. Yet such attention may distract from the less overtly violent, though ultimately more successful, proslavery push into the Far West.

With a limited perspective on proslavery expansionism, histories of the Civil War era generally suffer from geographic narrowness. Although historians frequently cite the westward expansion of slavery as the key issue that led to the war, only rarely do they look beyond Bleeding Kansas.⁴ With a few notable exceptions, the existing scholarship gives the misleading impression that California, for instance, ceased to attract sectional controversy after its admission as a free state in 1850. In these works, California makes only a fleeting appearance, receding from view upon the resolution of Henry Clay's Omnibus Bill. Similarly, other parts of the Far Southwest—including New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah—rarely figure into the political accounts of this period.⁵

Taking Davis and his geopolitics as a starting point, this article suggests new ways of thinking about the sectional crisis and the nature of proslavery expansion. It highlights episodes often deemed peripheral to the Civil War era to illustrate how the Far West—California and New Mexico, in particular—remained central to national politics throughout the period. Whereas historians have often overlooked sectional flashpoints such as the Gadsden Purchase, the U.S. camel corps, the Butterfield overland mail route, and the interminable Pacific railroad debates of the 1850s, contemporaries certainly did not. Davis played a crucial role at each juncture, bending the nation's destiny toward a proslavery end, and in the process, foregrounding the Far West in the American political consciousness. His vision was

vast; his execution often successful. Davis's was a dream predicated on commercial expansion as much as on territorial conquest, a dream dependent not necessarily on the spread of human bondage so much as the institution's political and economic influence, and a dream that almost outlived slavery itself.

■ It was also a dream many observers initially dismissed as impossible. During the tumultuous debates over the proposed Wilmot Proviso—which would have excluded slavery from all territories recently taken from Mexico—some of the most influential politicians of the day insisted that slavery was naturally confined to the southeastern portion of the United States. It could not extend into the newly acquired Southwest by simple laws of climate. “What more do you want?” Henry Clay asked in early 1850. “You have got what is worth more than a thousand Wilmot provisos. You have nature on your side—facts upon your side—and thus truth staring you in the face, that there is no slavery in those territories.”⁶ Daniel Webster famously reiterated this point in no mixed terms. “Now, as to California and New Mexico, I hold slavery to be excluded from those territories by a law even superior to that which admits and sanctions it in Texas,” he argued in the Senate. “I mean the law of nature—of physical geography—the law of the formation of the earth.”⁷ Even those who hailed from further south than Webster's Massachusetts and Clay's Kentucky cast doubt on the profitability of slave agriculture in the Southwest. Writing to John C. Calhoun in December 1847, South Carolinian and former minister to Mexico, Waddy Thompson, warned that the region offered more in liabilities than in profits. The land was ill-suited to the cultivation of cotton and sugar on a grand scale, he insisted, while transportation across the remote desert regions would pose perpetual problems.⁸

Others, however, were justifiably skeptical of this natural limits thesis, what the *New York Daily Times* dubbed a “clap-trap” argument, drummed up merely to defeat the Wilmot Proviso.⁹ Indeed, David Wilmot himself noted that African slavery had found its way into New Mexico as early as 1847.¹⁰ Few were more critical of the natural limits argument than Horace Mann, a Whig congressman and educational reformer. In a series of publicly circulated letters, he scolded Webster for his shortsighted acquiescence to the westward expansion of slavery. The institution would not obey the dictates of a “thermometer,” Mann warned. “Slavery depends, not upon Climate, but upon Conscience,” he wrote in 1850. “Wherever the wicked passions of the human heart can go, there slavery can go.” Even if slave agriculture proved unprofitable, however, the growing households of the Southwest would soon call for a hundred thousand domestic slaves, he

predicted. Furthermore, who was to say that gold in substantial quantities would not be found in New Mexico, as it had been in California a year earlier? "This is the very kind of labor on which slaves, in all time, have been so extensively employed," Mann rightfully noted.¹¹ His message was clear: unless checked by some external power, slavery would roll inexorably westward.

In an exceedingly rare occurrence, Jefferson Davis agreed with the antislavery New Englander, Horace Mann. There was no reason, Davis argued again and again, to assume that slavery would not be profitable and adaptable in the Mexican cession. After all, most abolitionists clearly did not subscribe to the natural limits thesis themselves, he asserted. Otherwise, why go to such lengths to restrict slavery in the new territories? A relatively junior senator during the debates over what would become the Compromise of 1850, Davis distinguished himself by opposing this antislavery agenda for the West, what he called the "robber's law."¹² With a small group of fellow southern statesmen, Davis pledged to "avail ourselves of every means . . . to prevent the admission of California as a State unless her southern boundary be reduced to 36 deg. 30 min."¹³ The new territories of New Mexico and California belonged largely to the South by right of conquest, he insisted on several occasions, as the slave states sacrificed a disproportionate amount of blood and treasure to wrest that land from Mexico.¹⁴

Rather than natural limits, Davis suggested, there were natural incentives for the expansion of slavery. Although much of the region remained unknown, reports from hunters indicated that the lower Colorado River boasted "widespread and fruitful valleys." Furthermore, there was always the prospect of gold, especially in the valleys around the Gila River.¹⁵ Like Mann, Davis predicted that slaves would soon be used profitably in mining operations. To buttress these claims, he solicited reports on the mineral opportunities in the Gila Valley from the ongoing U.S.-Mexico joint boundary commission. The news he received from the commissioner, John R. Bartlett, was certainly heartening. Bartlett had it on good authority that the area around the Gila possessed a "richness . . . as a mineral region unsurpassed in New Mexico, both in Gold Silver & Copper."¹⁶ Davis and his fellow advocates for the western expansion of slavery were being vindicated. It certainly looked as if human bondage would pay in the Southwest.

Despite such economic incentives, Congress voted to block slavery in at least part of the Mexican cession, admitting California to the Union as a free state in September 1850.¹⁷ This setback galled Davis and his fellow slaveholding expansionists. James Henry Hammond lamented that the South would be made a "Hayti" after it lost California to free labor, while

Davis briefly considered snatching the California bill from the speaker of the Senate and “tearing it to pieces.”¹⁸ Scholars, perhaps taken in by the alarmist tone of their subjects, have represented this moment as the breaking point in slaveholders’ far western ambitions. Yet Davis and other southerners soon recognized what many subsequent historians have not: California, though technically free, was not a lost cause for slaveholders. Southern interests—that is, the political, commercial and cultural influence of slaveholders—could continue expanding westward, even in the absence of chattel slavery itself. Thus, Davis retained a strong interest in California politics throughout the 1850s, keeping up a regular correspondence with several proslavery political operatives there. According to one such correspondent, Davis was the “champion” of southern émigrés in California, who looked to the Mississippi statesman to promote their interests on the Pacific slope.¹⁹ Over the course of the decade, he would not fail this trust.

■ From 1845 to the outbreak of the Civil War, no issue was more important to western expansionists on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line than the Pacific railroad. Whether the first transcontinental railway would run across free soil or through slave country divided the nation along sectional lines. Northerners and southerners alike recognized that whichever section won the railroad would not only gain access to California’s ports and the potentially lucrative Pacific trade; it would also control what would become the nation’s main commercial artery and all the states and territories it crossed. As the editor of the *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat* optimistically projected in 1853: “When the road is finally completed to the Pacific . . . the State of California, and the States which will intervene between that and Texas, being so intimately identified with us, in their commercial relations, will, as a matter of course, from interest as well as sympathy, join with our division of the country, as a common community, contending for common rights.”²⁰ In short, the political and commercial destiny of the Far West was up for grabs.

Southern railroad promoters began looking toward the Pacific when California was still a Mexican frontier territory. As early as 1836, expansionists in Texas and New Orleans explored the possibility of extending lines to the Pacific Coast, musing about the commercial windfall such a project would bring to their respective regions.²¹ But the debate did not become national until 1845, when New York merchant Asa Whitney introduced a memorial to Congress, outlining his plan for a railway from the Great Lakes into Oregon.²² Southerners rebutted, arguing that Whitney’s route was far too northerly and therefore subject to inclement weather.²³

In a series of commercial conventions over the coming years, a growing proslavery railroad coalition emerged to articulate an alternative to Whitney's plan. Although there would be significant disputes over which southern city should be designated the route's eastern terminus, proslavery expansionists proved more systematic and far-seeing than their northern counterparts, keeping the prize of western commerce steadily within their sights.²⁴ By the early 1850s this loose coalition—Jefferson Davis, J. D. B. De Bow, Matthew Fontaine Maury, James Gadsden, and William M. Gwin, among its most prominent members—emerged as a political force in pursuit of what abolitionists ominously dubbed “the great slavery road.”²⁵

Davis took center stage in this campaign when he joined President Franklin Pierce's cabinet as secretary of war in March 1853. With Congress divided over the desired route, Davis and other southerners moved ahead with a longstanding plan to secure additional territory along the Mexican border, thereby opening the way for a more direct line across the Southwest. At Davis's urging, Pierce appointed a proslavery railroad booster, James Gadsden, to negotiate a land purchase from Mexico along the southwestern border, in what is now southern New Mexico and Arizona.

That Davis singled out the South Carolinian for the job is hardly surprising; Gadsden's pedigree as a proslavery imperialist was unimpeachable. In 1851, he headed a group of planters who petitioned the California assembly to form a slaveholding colony in the southern part of the state, and planned to bring between five hundred and eight hundred slaves into the breakaway territory.²⁶ His California-bound slaveholders would be preceded by a mounted corps and a team of engineers to survey the route to the Pacific, which could be used as a stage road and, later, a railway. “Open such a way, and the Railroad follows,” he declared, thus wedding his plans for a Pacific slave colony with his transcontinental railroad promotion.²⁷

When Gadsden entered formal negotiations with Mexico in late 1853, it was clear that his mission was of a thoroughly proslavery nature. Before departing for Mexico, Gadsden sought the counsel of his unofficial sponsor, Davis. “I should be pleased to hear from you, and to receive any suggestions of importance relative to the mission,” he wrote Davis in May 1853. “I shall need the countenance & encouragement of my Southern Friends, as my appointment to Mexico is said to have been induced by my being a Southern Man.” As if there was any doubt, Gadsden pledged to “uphold & apply” the “principles of the South” in his forthcoming negotiations. Although Gadsden disguised such brazenly proslavery motives in his public correspondence and statements, few were under any illusions. He went to Mexico as Davis's handpicked man, an agent of the South, and a champion of the great slavery road.²⁸

Opponents of southern expansion condemned Gadsden's work. When he returned to Washington in late December 1853 with a treaty calling for \$15 million in exchange for nearly forty thousand square miles of Mexican territory, critics came out in force. "The friends of the Southern Pacific Railroad are the only *bona fide* supporters of the treaty," a correspondent to the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* complained, "and it might just as well be called a 'purchase of the right of way for a railroad to the Pacific,' as by any other name." That such an important diplomatic mission had been entrusted to a patently proslavery schemer was a serious breach of political conduct, the correspondent added.²⁹ According to the *National Era*, Gadsden's negotiations had not only opened the way for a Pacific railroad "favored by Southern Nullifiers" but also handed the present "Slaveholding Administration" an opportunity to create two or three additional slaves states from the new territory.³⁰ During deliberations in the House of Representatives, hot-headed Missourian Thomas Hart Benton deemed the treaty a monumental waste of money. A longtime supporter of a central transcontinental route, Benton ridiculed the prospects for railroad construction through this new territory, "a country so utterly desolate, desert, and God-forsaken, that Kit Carson says a wolf could not make his living upon it." He accused the treaty's architects of orchestrating a vast conspiracy to push a Pacific railroad through barren borderlands and into New San Diego, a yet-to-be-built city where southern speculators would make untold fortunes.³¹

Ultimately, in the spring of 1854, the treaty passed over the strenuous objections of congressmen like Benton, although the Senate shaved nine thousand square miles and \$5 million off the final agreement.³² Gadsden griped about the scaled-down version of his original deal, but his negotiations had resulted in a decisive victory for proslavery expansionists: the final strip of land, measuring about thirty thousand square miles, provided crucial real estate for a southern railroad. Furthermore, it signaled that southern imperialists possessed the political capital necessary to advance their designs in the West at a time when sectional compromise was proving increasingly elusive. The last major territorial acquisition of the era, the Gadsden Purchase moved Jefferson Davis and his allies one step closer to fulfilling their ambitions in the West.

While Gadsden negotiated in Mexico, Davis opened yet another front in the southern railroad campaign. Passed in March 1853, the Pacific Railroad Survey bill authorized Davis, as secretary of war, to assemble teams to carry out a reconnaissance of the Trans-Mississippi West over a ten-month period—though topological work eventually stretched into late 1854. The act was born out of a belief that scientific objectivity could break

the congressional logjam and settle the railroad question once and for all. Whereas sectional motives guided the nation's statesmen, its engineers could presumably put aside politics in the interest of topological precision. Under great national scrutiny, six federally appointed engineers surveyed a total of four major routes: a northern route between the 41st and 42d parallels, a central route along the 38th parallel, a south-central route along the 35th parallel, and an extreme southern route along the 32d parallel.³³

Yet scientific objectivity met its limits in Davis. Feigning sectional indifference, the secretary of war proved eager to channel this opportunity to the South's advantage, a fact not lost on political rivals like Thomas Hart Benton.³⁴ To maintain the appearance of impartiality, Davis tactfully (or perhaps cunningly) appointed mostly northern topological officers. In his detailed summary of the surveys, however, he let his sectional bias shine. Starting with the northernmost survey, he systematically argued that every route except that along the 32d parallel faced severe obstacles: cost, length, climate, or a combination of all three. Meanwhile he dismissed, as mere trifles, serious impediments to the far southern route, such as a lack of water and timber. "A comparison of the results," Davis wrote in his official report, "conclusively shows that the route of the 32nd parallel is, of those surveyed, 'the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi river to the Pacific ocean.'"³⁵ For him, this was a foregone conclusion, but for many others, his highly suspect summary was further proof of southern intrigue and slaveholders' determination to drive the railroad through their section at any price.³⁶

Although their desired railroad existed only on paper, southern imperialists had cause for celebration. By 1854, a commercial empire stretching to the Pacific seemed close at hand for slavery's cotton economy. Gadsden had negotiated a favorable purchase of land from Mexico. Davis was in control of the railroad surveys. Arkansas and Texas were poised to extend their railroad networks and link them with other burgeoning southern lines. And President Pierce seemed favorable to southern expansionist aims.³⁷ Further, slaveholders could count on a powerful body of southern Californians to support a route through slave country. In the summer of 1853, delegates at a San Diego convention resolved to promote the route along the Gila River into their city, and dispatched Col. John B. Magruder to press their case in Washington.³⁸ The winds of history were blowing in a distinctly southerly direction.

Scholars of slaveholding imperialism would do well to examine more closely these southern railroad schemes. Whereas proslavery filibusters have more successfully captured the historical imagination, it was southern commercial expansionists who presented the greater threat to antislavery

northerners. In contrast to would-be conquistadors like William Walker and Henry A. Crabb, slaveholding railroad promoters largely controlled the levers of power in Washington and sustained a prolonged and multi-pronged campaign to extend their political vision across the continent. Through their railroad boosterism, southerners articulated some of the most ambitious imperial objectives of this era. They actively pursued a project that would subdue and settle the West, tap the burgeoning markets of the Pacific Coast, boost the industrial capacity of the slave states, and unite the southern half of the continent along what would become its great commercial highway.³⁹ And these were no mere pipe dreams, as their political opponents recognized. Indeed, northern leaders were desperate to check these proslavery aspirations and to advance competing visions of their own. The result was the longest-lived political controversy of the period: from 1845 until the outbreak of the Civil War, the Pacific railroad mired the question of western development in sectional rancor. As Jefferson Davis, among many others, recognized, the nation's political destiny hinged on access to the Far West.

■ Between Davis and his fellow southern railroad promoters, the issue of funding presented a potential sticking point. Should individual states pay for railroad construction within their borders, or should the federal government bankroll the entire project? In other words, was such a sweeping federal undertaking—which even the most conservative estimates placed at over \$100 million—compatible with the states rights position so many of these southern politicians claimed to represent?⁴⁰ While some maintained that Pacific railroad development was best left to individual states, a majority of proslavery leaders agreed on the necessity of federal aid for such a project.⁴¹

The buccaneering spirit of individual politicians explains much of this logic. After all, railroading was big business, and slaveholding leaders were just as eager as their Yankee counterparts to snatch the financial fruits of internal improvements. When it came to railroad development, southern politicians had been reaping the rewards of federal largess since 1850, when Congress began offering free land to railway corporations in order to incentivize settlement and development. The land was distributed in a checkerboard pattern, with alternating plots either available for sale to the public or given gratis to railroad companies. As historian Scott Reynolds Nelson illustrates, southern politicians were particularly adept at bending railroad legislation to proslavery ends. Senator David Rice Atchison of Missouri and his proslavery allies, for example, capitalized on land giveaways for the benefit of themselves and their allies. Because of this clique,

writes Nelson, “when land grants to railroads began in 1850, most went either through southern states or toward them.”⁴²

Southern Democrats could easily shelve their states’ rights scruples when properly enticed by the financial windfall of a transcontinental railroad through their region. Centralization at the federal level, which so many slaveholders decried through the 1850s and beyond, was only considered a menace when it threatened slavery and southern economic interests. As Davis knew all too well, strict constructionism had historically taken a backseat to imperial imperatives.⁴³ For example, slaveholders relinquished their states’ rights doctrine when presented with the opportunity to acquire Louisiana from France in 1807. They embraced federal power when, in the 1830s, the military cleared valuable plantation real estate by forcibly relocating Indians from lands in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. They cheered the annexation of Texas and the conquest of New Mexico and California, again made possible only through overwhelming federal force. They cried foul when several northern legislatures turned states’ rights to their own advantage by passing so-called Personal Liberty Laws in opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. And they endorsed the federal judiciary when it handed down its proslavery ruling in the *Dred Scott* case. As the long history of proslavery politicking makes clear, the only consistent element of the southern states’ rights mantra was its inconsistency. States’ rights was a banner to be unfurled whenever politically and economically expedient, then quietly stashed when the full force of the federal government was needed.⁴⁴

In their maneuverings at the federal level, however, the slaveholding advocates of a Pacific railroad achieved only a pyrrhic victory. Bleeding Kansas is remembered today as perhaps the decisive flashpoint in the nation’s spiral toward civil war; at the time, however, it was seen largely as the byproduct of the intractable Pacific railroad feud. Indeed, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 had its roots in opposition to the great slavery road.⁴⁵ As observers noted, railroad construction would have to be accompanied by white settlement along its path, and Nebraska, prime terrain for a central railway, had been guaranteed to native populations since 1834. So long as Indian Country remained closed to white settlement, the odds on a northern route winning the Pacific railroad were slim. On the other hand, the 32d parallel route ran through lands—if occupied by potentially hostile Indian tribes—at least open to white settlement. When it appeared as if the southern route had become the clear favorite, northerners moved with alacrity.

Benton took an early lead in campaigning for a railroad from St. Louis and for the accompanying organization of Nebraska, and soon thereafter

Willard Hall and William Richardson spearheaded a bill in the House. Just as the Senate was debating one of William Gwin's southern-oriented Pacific railroad proposals in 1853, Hall made a plea for a more northerly route, accompanying the opening of Nebraska. "Why, everybody is talking about a railroad to the Pacific ocean," he complained. "In the name of God, how is the railroad to be made if you will *never* let people live on the lands through which the road passes?" Without the organization of Nebraska, he rightly noted, Congress would likely be forced to settle on some point in Texas as the road's eastern terminus.⁴⁶ Overwhelming opposition from southerners in the Senate, including William Gwin, effectively killed the original bill.

Stephen Douglas revived the Nebraska question the next year, but this time with the support of the South. To gain these crucial votes he made what many northerners regarded as a Faustian bargain: his bill repealed the Missouri Compromise line, split the western territory into two halves—Nebraska and Kansas—and left the slavery question to the dictates of popular sovereignty. Ironically, a bill that had as one of its aims the facilitation of another railroad route ultimately derailed the Pacific railroad debate.⁴⁷ The ensuing conflict between free soilers and proslavery squatters in Kansas pushed sectional tensions to a near breaking point and thus effectively foreclosed the possibility of compromise over a transcontinental railroad. Northerners would not countenance a southern route, while southerners closed ranks against construction along a northern line. Congressmen would continue to agitate for various Pacific railroad routes, but with increasing jadedness. Of all the casualties produced by Bleeding Kansas, the most politically consequential was the Pacific railroad.⁴⁸

And yet, southern dreams of a Pacific empire did not die on the bloodied soil of Kansas. These visions took a strange (and hairy) turn in 1855 when Jefferson Davis won another victory for infrastructural development in the Southwest. An American camel corps—funded by Congress, outfitted in the Middle East, and transported to the desert Southwest—was Davis's grandest western initiative next to the Pacific railroad. The grandeur of this plan, however, was initially lost on fellow politicians, who nearly laughed Davis out of the Senate in 1851 when he first proposed a \$30,000 congressional appropriation to support this corps of thirty camels and twenty dromedaries in the American West. But when his fellow senators finally stopped laughing, they had to take stock of a serious proposal. Beginning with a modest appropriation, Davis had bold dreams for a camel corps as the new means of transportation in the Southwest. These animals, he argued, could be used to overcome the region's powerful Indian tribes and provide protection for both settlers and mail routes. Davis praised the

camel as the “ship of the desert,” destined to become “the greatest stroke of economy which has ever been made in regard to transportation.”⁴⁹ After four years of lobbying, he finally won his camel corps by 1855, with thirty-four animals arriving in Texas a year later.⁵⁰

Davis’s camel scheme was of a less patently proslavery nature than his railroad agitation, although it still had a decidedly southern flavor. After all, these camels were bound for the Southwest, across terrain Davis and others hoped would soon host a southern transcontinental railroad. As he recognized, railways and overland roads would not build themselves. They had to be carved out of Indian country and guarded against Native peoples. Furthermore, almost two thousand miles separated the Pacific Coast from the Mississippi Valley, with no major intervening rivers crossing east to west. Camels, Davis reasoned, would help subdue this region and therefore expedite travel for westward-bound settlers. Easy transit across this southernmost corridor would facilitate the expansion of proslavery interests. “If we had a good railroad and other roads making it convenient to go through Texas into New Mexico, and through New Mexico into Southern California,” Davis mused privately to a friend in 1855, “our people with their servants, their horses and their cows would gradually pass westward over fertile lands into mining districts, and in the latter, especially, the advantage of their associated labor would impress itself upon others about them.”⁵¹ By this logic, slaveholding imperialism did not require grand conquests; it simply called for infrastructural development. And camels could play a vital part in bringing that about.

For years to come, Davis would defend his camel corps against accusations that the project was a thinly veiled proslavery plot.⁵² He had always been careful to maintain a nationalist, rather than sectional, posture whenever discussing the project, yet criticism persisted.⁵³ Amid rising sectional tensions, Congress refused to appropriate funds for the experiment in 1858, 1859, and 1860. By 1859 more than eighty camels were scattered across forts in California and Texas, but popular support for the project had waned. According to historian Thomas Connelly, the public could never quite look beyond the camel’s “personal habits of regurgitating on passersby or blowing a bloody bladder out of its mouth when frightened, its acute halitosis and general bad odor, its fierceness during rutting season, its voluminous sneeze, its shedding of large clumps of hair until it looked perfectly hideous, and its awkward appearance.”⁵⁴ Camels, in short, did not endear themselves to American travelers.

Quixotic though this project may seem in hindsight, the camel corps highlights Davis’s commitment to southwestern development and his versatility in bringing such dreams to fruition. He endured the initial derision

of Congress to pull off an expensive and logistically difficult operation. He persevered because camel transport was a key component in his vision for westward expansion, a link in a transportation network that would bring the slaveholding South into the Far West. Although the camel corps never measured up to its initial promise, Davis's dreams of western empire would endure through yet another proslavery transportation scheme.

■ As Pacific railroad bills continued to languish in a divided Congress, a corollary project reignited southern hopes for western expansion and further enflamed sectional animosities. Nearly forgotten by scholars today, the Butterfield overland mail route was a cause célèbre in the late 1850s and one of slaveholders' greatest coups. The project did not begin as a sectional affair, however. In March 1857 Congress passed a \$600,000 appropriation for the construction of an overland mail route from an undetermined point in the Mississippi Valley to San Francisco. The price tag was high, but the payoff, many congressmen reasoned, would be substantial. Not only would this new road provide faster, more regular mail service to the Pacific Coast, but it was also expected to offer a safe overland trail for westering emigrants. If successful, this route was also anticipated to become the precursor to the long-awaited Pacific railroad. Iron rails, went the logic, would follow this emigrant's trail, and east and west would finally be connected along a well-traveled, federally financed corridor.

To avoid the sort of sectional standoff that had so frequently stymied Pacific railroad bills, the route's location was left to contractors, who began submitting bids in summer 1857. There was just one problem with this plan, however. His name was Aaron V. Brown, U.S. postmaster-general. Former law partner of James K. Polk, congressman, governor of Tennessee, and a champion of Texas annexation, Brown had established his credentials as an avowedly "strong Southern man."⁵⁵ Recently appointed postmaster-general by President Buchanan, Brown disliked all nine routes proposed by the bidders, likely because none passed south of Albuquerque. So Brown took it upon himself to designate a new route and forced all contractors to conform to his geographic strictures. In direct violation of the congressional act, he stipulated a bifurcated route beginning at St. Louis and Memphis (his hometown), then converging at Little Rock, before swinging through Texas to El Paso, Fort Yuma, and Los Angeles, and finally up the valleys of California to San Francisco. In total, his route added six hundred miles to the longest alternative bid.

In an era of brazen proslavery maneuvers, Brown's rerouting of a congressional act ranked near the top of the list. Although this overland road would not necessarily serve the expansion of chattel slavery itself, it would

advance the interests of the slave states through which it passed. As the logic went, settlers from these states would fan out along the route, and even if they failed to bring their slave property with them, they would certainly bring their proslavery politics, further strengthening ties between the South and the Far Southwest. As the Pacific railroad was ultimately expected to trace this mail route, Brown's maneuver also marked a signal victory for the prospects of the great slavery road. "The route for a Southern railroad and the establishment of the Great Overland Mail line upon that route, are considered parts of the same system," the *Sacramento Daily Union* lamented in December 1857. "Undertaken with the view of connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific," these two projects were "devised" to enable "a population from the Southern States [to] naturally take possession of the country over which the railroad and mail line will pass."⁵⁶ Between the mail route and anticipated railroad, the westward flow of migrants and commerce would follow a decidedly southern course, thereby ensuring a continental reach for proslavery politics. Just as Davis pursued the lodestar of sectional aggrandizement at the expense of national interests, Brown ran roughshod over congressional mandates to advance a pro-southern agenda in the West.⁵⁷

Postmaster Brown did little to disguise his southern partisanship in his official report. Like Davis before him, he dismissed more northern routes as excessively cold and inaccessible. Along a northern route, the mail would not reach the Pacific Coast in the twenty-five-day window that the act stipulated. In addition to these delays, Brown argued, travelers would also be imperiled. He imagined passengers along an Albuquerque route, "benumbed by the cold for more than a week, overcome by the loss of sleep." Such a route, "under circumstances of so much severe exposure, would, in a few years, mark every station with the fresh graves of its victims," Brown concluded. He rightfully argued that the southernmost route was flatter and warmer, but implausibly claimed that it also suffered from less water scarcity than the alternatives. He invited northern opposition when he boasted that his mail route would link up with a vast southern transportation network, feeding off "all the great railroads of Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky . . . and New Orleans and Texas."⁵⁸

Brown struck a decidedly imperialist note in the final part of his report. Not only would this road contribute to southern transportation fortunes, help populate western territories, and bind the East to the Pacific, it would also facilitate southwestern empire along the U.S.-Mexico border, potentially serving as a springboard for future conquests. "In time of peace it will shed its blessings on both nations," he argued, "whilst in time of war

it will furnish a highway for troops and munitions of war, which might enable us to vindicate our rights, and preserve untarnished our national honor." Again, western transportation facilities and empire fit hand-in-glove. Fittingly, Brown drew on another great western imperialist to justify his work: Jefferson Davis. He cited Davis as the ultimate authority, "who collected a larger amount of reliable information on this subject than any other person," and who also favored this southernmost route.⁵⁹ Indeed, Brown's arguments for a southern overland mail route and Davis's earlier arguments for a southern transcontinental railroad are largely indistinguishable. Although Davis's report only deepened the conflict over the Pacific railroad, it enjoyed something of an afterlife through Brown's maneuverings and thus helped achieve a substantial proslavery victory in southwestern transportation.

With a southern overland mail route thus secured, the slave states applauded their newest champion. The *Alexandria Gazette* called Brown's report "clear, simple, and comprehensive," while the *Memphis Daily Appeal* cheered him as "able and masterly." Brown, after all, had become a hometown hero in Memphis, and the *Appeal* took note: "The citizens of Memphis, especially, should thank and remember him for the strong stand he has taken for their city as a terminus, and for the unanswerable arguments he has so successfully brought to bear to sustain it."⁶⁰ Shortly after the opening of the route, an observer in Texas noted that already "settlements are rapidly extending westward along the route. Even at such an early stage in the road's history, he concluded, "the Overland Mail Route is really a magnificent enterprise, and one of the greatest achievements of American progress."⁶¹ President Buchanan, a strong southern sympathizer despite his Pennsylvania origins, was equally jubilant. "It is a glorious triumph for civilization and the Union," he announced. "Settlements will soon follow the course of the road, and the East and the West will be bound together by a chain of living Americans, which can never be broken."⁶²

Northern outrage was proportional to the audacity of Brown's act. The *Chicago Tribune* called it "one of the greatest swindles ever perpetrated upon the country by the slave holders," while an equally indignant *Ohio State Journal* dubbed it "a shameful outrage" and a "*revolution of law*."⁶³ The road would enrich not only the slave states, the *Journal* added, but Brown himself, who purportedly owned real estate across the route he selected.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the *National Era* protested, "the South demanded the sacrifice of the public convenience upon the altar of Slavery propagandism, and the South must be gratified at every cost."⁶⁵ The San Francisco press echoed many of these complaints, noting that all mail and passengers would have to be routed through Los Angeles, a proslavery bastion,

before ultimately reaching the much more populous areas around the San Francisco Bay. “Under the miserably short-sighted policy of the Executive,” the *San Francisco Bulletin* complained, “California is made to suffer, and the public Treasury is robbed”—and all for a route that passed too far south to attract a critical mass of passenger traffic.⁶⁶ These faultfinders could have applied to this overland road what was once said of the regional San Antonio-San Diego line: It was a route “from no place through nothing to nowhere.”⁶⁷

Northern and Border State congressmen also lambasted Brown’s road, linking it to a longer history of proslavery scheming in the Far Southwest. In a lengthy and impassioned speech, Representative Francis Blair of Missouri connected the dots between the Gadsden Purchase, Davis’s Pacific railroad surveys, the camel corps, and now this overland mail route. “Why was it that an appropriation of \$10,000,000 to purchase Arizona, appropriations to import camels, to bore artesian wells, and to print an endless series of the most costly books . . . could be made during the dominancy of the so-called Democracy, and no effort whatever made to find a line for the central route?” Blair demanded. The answer, of course, was simple. The “southern faction” forced the hand of both the executive and Congress to “dictate absolutely its policy.” The newest outrage, Brown’s overland mail road, was yet another example of proslavery expansionists sacrificing national interests and considerable capital to advance their sectional agenda, Blair added.⁶⁸ In later debates in the senate, other critics piled on. Lyman Trumbull slammed the postmaster general for overriding congressional will to build a road “as crooked as an ox-bow” and a good deal longer than originally advertised.⁶⁹ To Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, the new mail road would pass along a “desert route, now and hereafter to be known, I trust, as the disunion route.”⁷⁰ As these congressmen recognized, the stakes were high in the contest for western transportation, and slaveholders again held the winning hand.

Despite hearty protest, in September 1857 A.V. Brown awarded the contract to John Butterfield, a New York expressman and personal friend of President Buchanan. Twice-weekly mail service was to begin one year later, a formidable task even with the resources at Butterfield’s disposal. He had to construct a road that ran over twenty-eight hundred miles of terrain that, for much of its expanse, was sparsely populated, rugged, and short on water. There was also the problem of Indian tribes. To secure the right-of-way through their lands, Butterfield would distribute more than \$10,000 per year to Native Americans in the region. His team also dug a series of wells along the route and constructed roughly two hundred stations. For the transport work ahead, the line purchased a hundred coaches,

a thousand horses, five hundred mules, and recruited nearly eight hundred men. All told, it was an impressive undertaking, and by 1860 the Butterfield line was carrying more letters than the U.S. steamship service. Although the vast majority of westward migrants continued to use the central overland trail, settlements along the Butterfield route grew considerably, especially in Texas. The population of chief towns on the route nearly doubled, while smaller settlements also sprang up near its path. In these new towns, the line's stations often served as the commercial center.⁷¹ Ultimately the line would not outlive the sectional crisis that it did so much to exacerbate. The famed but short-lived Pony Express, which followed a central route, originated in 1860 as a response to the far southern Butterfield road. With secession, the Butterfield company moved its operations to the central line, although Confederates continued to move over the old route.⁷²

The Butterfield line could be considered the postscript to over a decade of proslavery scheming for a transcontinental railroad. Southerners did not win their great slavery road, but with the establishment of the overland mail route, they secured what many considered the next best thing. The Butterfield line only accelerated the migration and commercial exchange that had been conducted between the slave states and the Desert West for decades. And it stood as a physical embodiment of the link connecting South and Southwest. That the route was established over the fierce resistance of northern politicians highlights just how adept southerners had become in advancing their western agenda. Between the Gadsden Purchase, Jefferson Davis's camel corps, the Pacific railroad surveys, and, finally, the overland mail route slaveholders consistently outmaneuvered their adversaries to dictate infrastructural policy for the Far West.

■ Although the Butterfield road never carried the mass of southern migrants that its champions once hoped, Jefferson Davis and his fellow proslavery expansionists could nevertheless look back on a decade of western scheming with satisfaction. They had, after all, dominated the debate over southwestern expansion at nearly every turn. And their political opponents understood this, as Blair's comments in Congress make clear. Even though chattel slavery failed to take deep root in southwestern soil, the extension of slave-based plantation agriculture had never been the single-minded focus of these expansionists. Southerners like Davis lusted after a commercial and political domain from one end of the continent to the other, an empire of influence that would wed the Far West firmly to the fortunes of the slave South. And by the eve of the Civil War, that empire seemed within reach.

The ostensibly free state of California, for instance, had aligned itself with the slave South throughout the 1850s. The Mississippi planter-cum-California senator, William Gwin, set the state on a proslavery course for nearly the entire decade. He also proved a tireless champion of the Pacific railroad, with a clear preference for the far southern route. During the election of 1860, California's entire congressional delegation supported the proslavery presidential candidate, John C. Breckinridge. Abraham Lincoln may have carried California, but he did so by the smallest percentage of ballots in any free state.⁷³ Southerners had shuttled hundreds of black slaves into California during the gold rush, and legislators and jurists protected that property long after California outlawed slavery in its 1849 constitution. The fugitive slave code of 1852, for instance, enabled slaveholders to retain their chattel, so long as they eventually returned them to the South. In dozens of cases, state courts upheld this law and refused to liberate slaves on California's technically free soil. In addition to an estimated six hundred to fifteen hundred black slaves who labored in California over the course of this period, there were untold numbers of unfree Native American laborers.⁷⁴ One Tennessee transplant, Cave Couts, established a southern-style plantation outside San Diego, using Native debt peons instead of black slaves.⁷⁵ California was not the plantation South; but in the eyes of substantial numbers of slaveholding émigrés like Couts, it was a viable alternative.

Slaveholders could also look favorably on developments in the territory of New Mexico. In early 1859, the territorial legislature outraged antislavery forces when it passed a draconian slave code.⁷⁶ It was a victory, not necessarily for the handful of slaveholders within the territory, but for southern politicians, like Jefferson Davis, who craved greater influence over the Southwest. Here was proof that New Mexico's commercial and political connections to the South, especially Missouri, translated into sweeping proslavery enactments. The territorial delegate, Miguel Otero—who had married into a powerful Charlestonian family—recognized that such an act would further cement New Mexico's alliance to the slave South, or would, in his words, attract "greater . . . political attentions from the States."⁷⁷ When the territory's speaker of the house attempted to repeal the bill, he was branded a Black Republican and stripped of his speakership.⁷⁸ With a territorial secretary from Mississippi, a governor from North Carolina, and the leading newspaper editor from Missouri, New Mexico's leadership was firmly in the proslavery column. It could be difficult to determine where the slave South ended and the Far West began.

If slaveholders could count on sympathy from New Mexico, they could expect absolute fealty from Arizona. Although still technically part of New

Mexico, Arizonians had developed a strong sense of regional identity after years of petitioning for separate territorial status. With a politically powerful white population, overwhelmingly southern in origin and proslavery in outlook, there was no secret as to where the proposed territory's loyalties would lie. Not surprisingly, slaveholders like Senator Gwin, Thomas Rusk of Texas, Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi, and Jefferson Davis himself supported Arizona's territorial bids.⁷⁹ Although the region never won its separate territorial status before the Civil War, Davis could congratulate himself on the fact that the Gadsden Purchase lands, which constituted a significant portion of Arizona, had attracted such a fervent proslavery population. The depth of the region's proslavery commitment became clear when the secession movement swept westward from the Deep South. In March 1861 a convention of Arizonians met at Mesilla and unanimously adopted a series of secessionist resolutions, denouncing the "present Black Republican administration" and vowing to "resist any officers appointed to this Territory by said administration with whatever means in our power."⁸⁰

Arizona had therefore declared its allegiance to the Confederacy—before Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. When a federal agent arrived in the breakaway territory in late spring 1861, he was met by a hostile crowd of secessionists who warned him that they had "a fine barrel of tar, into which they will put the first officer appointed by President Lincoln, feather him, and start him out to fly."⁸¹ Writing from Mesilla in June 1861, a unionist observer could only lament, "This country is now as much in the possession of the enemy as Charleston is."⁸² The Gadsden Purchase of 1853 was paying dividends as Confederates eyed a western empire in 1861.

■ From the first flush of secession to the rebellion's collapse, Jefferson Davis—now president of the Confederate States of America—never turned his back on the Far West. Although he recognized that the war would be won or lost in the major military theaters of the East, and thus directed the vast majority of Confederate troops and materiel there, he continued to entertain grand schemes in the Trans-Mississippi West, at times even diverting scarce resources to that theater. What Davis had coveted for roughly a decade—access to the Pacific Coast along a far southern corridor—he could now pursue more aggressively through his own militarized state. Indeed, to secure an outlet to the Pacific remained the overriding Confederate objective in the West.⁸³ Access to California's ports would enable the Confederacy to circumvent the stranglehold that the federal blockade had imposed along the Atlantic seaboard. In the process, Confederates hoped to secure the mineral wealth of Colorado and

especially California. With these objectives in mind, the rebel government targeted the Far Southwest for its first invasion of the war.

It was a modest invasion, to be sure. But with only 258 Texans, Col. John Baylor managed to beat back larger Union forces in several engagements in New Mexico. By August 1, 1861, he had declared Arizona a Confederate territory, with Mesilla as its capital. Arizona, a longstanding hotbed of proslavery activity, now had the protection of a Confederate army and the legitimacy of a Confederate government. Writing to colleagues and superiors, Baylor trumpeted the territory's "vast mineral resources" and its geographic position "affording an outlet to the Pacific."⁸⁴ He also looked eagerly to California, where he expected to draw reinforcements from its substantial pro-Confederate population. "California is on the eve of a revolution," he reported, with "many Southern men there who would cheerfully join us if they could get to us."⁸⁵ The California revolution of Baylor's dreams never materialized, but substantial Confederate activity, especially within Los Angeles County, forced Union officials to garrison the southern part of the state, diverting needed troops from the theater in New Mexico. Just as many southern Californians supported the great slavery road during the antebellum period, they would continue to aid the proslavery cause during the war itself.⁸⁶

Although Davis repeatedly insisted that his government sought "no conquest, no aggrandizement," his imperialist intentions were clear to anyone in the Far West during these early months of the war.⁸⁷ As Baylor consolidated control over Arizona, Davis authorized a far larger invasion force into the Southwest. Under the command of Gen. Henry Hopkins Sibley, a rebel army of roughly twenty-seven hundred men, along with four thousand animals and three hundred wagons, marched across Texas and into New Mexico in the fall of 1861. By March 1862 Sibley captured the New Mexican capital, Santa Fe, and seemed poised for further conquests. According to one of Sibley's top lieutenants, "*The objective aim and design of the campaign was the conquest of California.*"⁸⁸ Yet these high hopes turned to dust under the region's blistering sun. By the summer of 1862 Texan invaders were beating a hasty retreat in the face of mounting operational difficulties and military setbacks: the loss of supply wagons at Glorieta Pass, advancing Union forces, Indian attacks, and, as Megan Kate Nelson has argued, devastating attrition caused by the environmental challenges of the region.⁸⁹ Sibley's once victorious invasion force had been reduced to a bobtail. With his defeat passed the high water mark of Confederate empire in the Far West.⁹⁰

Still, despite this setback, proslavery western fantasies persisted for years, a fact often overlooked by historians. The Confederacy was never

able to mount another far western invasion on the scale of Sibley's operation, but not for lack of trying. Davis would authorize several ambitious southwestern campaigns before the war was out. Meanwhile, Confederate operatives on the Pacific Coast hatched plans to frustrate the Union war effort with the limited resources at their disposal. For instance, a band of Confederate irregulars launched a small-scale guerilla war in California, robbing a gold-laden stagecoach and killing a police officer while wounding several others in a series of shootouts. According to the second-in-command, "Our object was to raise an insurrection in California, if we were molested."⁹¹ They never managed to generate a widespread insurrection, but, along with several other Confederate schemers, they kept unionist officials in the Far West on high alert.

Some of those Confederate western operations took the shape of piracy. In an anonymous, open letter to President Lincoln, proslavery journalist Edward Pollard claimed that Confederate pirates "will scour the South Pacific as well as other oceans of the world; they will penetrate into every sea, and will find as tempting prizes in the silk ships of China as in the gold-freighted steamers of California."⁹² Davis was more cautious about embracing open piracy, but he did show "great interest" when California secessionist Asbury Harpending presented a plan to seize Union gold shipments leaving from Pacific ports. According to Harpending, Davis claimed that intercepting that cargo "would be more important than many victories in the field."⁹³ Harpending received a captain's commission in the Confederate navy and with the backing of two coconspirators, purchased the *J. M. Chapman*, a ninety-ton schooner moored in San Francisco Bay. Together, the men secretly armed the ship with two twelve-pound cannons and staffed it with Confederate sympathizers. The plan was to sail to Mexico, seize the first three eastbound Pacific Mail steamers, confiscate the ships' gold and silver, and deliver their booty to the Confederate treasury. Unfortunately for Harpending, his navigator betrayed the plot and local police and a detachment of Marines raided the *Chapman*.⁹⁴ Although Harpending never made it to the high seas, his scheme threw San Francisco into a panic. "These men of the *Chapman* . . . committed a treason as grave as any that ever was, or ever could be, committed," cried the *Alta California*. "That of Arnold was not baser or more malicious."⁹⁵ The press raised the cry for the execution of the *Chapman* conspirators and demands poured into Washington for additional military protections for San Francisco's harbor.⁹⁶ Just a year later, the Confederate high command authorized another naval expedition to disrupt the Union's Pacific trade. But again, Union officials foiled the plot before it could be set in motion.⁹⁷

Davis's dream of a western empire proved hard to kill, even as his forces faced defeat from one end of the continent to the other. While Ulysses S. Grant's army began its long push into Confederate Virginia, Davis authorized the most fanciful western invasion yet. The eccentric writer and adventurer Lansford Hastings, whose infamous guidebook led the Donner party to its fatal journey across the Sierra Nevada in 1847, had proposed to raise a force of three thousand to five thousand California Confederates for the purpose of retaking Arizona and thereby securing a "connecting link between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans."⁹⁸ Although Hastings had no military experience and few credentials in general, Davis commissioned him a major in the Confederate military in early 1864.

Hastings made little headway, yet Davis refused to abandon the Far West. With his entire government in disarray and his armies in shambles, the Confederate commander-in-chief turned to John Baylor once again, overruling the war department to endorse a final far western invasion plan early the next year. Baylor was to raise a force of roughly ten thousand men from Texas, Arizona and California to repeat his earlier exploits on a grander scale and reclaim the Southwest.⁹⁹ On March 25, 1865, two weeks before Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Baylor received his colonel's commission and began recruiting troops. The war ended before Baylor could begin his campaign, yet Arizona rebels were still trying to muster their own invasion weeks after the Confederacy had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Davis's dreams of empire continued to enjoy an afterlife in the region he had done so much to shape.

■ Taking seriously Jefferson Davis's geopolitical vision opens a new, more capacious way of thinking about proslavery imperialism. To be sure, Davis and his allies hoped to export chattel slaves to the furthest reaches of the continent. Yet his expansionist objectives did not rely solely, or even mainly, on the acquisition of more territory for plantation agriculture. Instead, he advanced a sweeping vision for a sphere of influence, built on commercial and political networks and buttressed by a vast transportation infrastructure, as the means to establish southern dominion over the Far West. This was a particularly nimble, resilient, and largely successful brand of expansionism. Whereas southern filibusters failed in their attempts to seize Cuba and held Nicaragua for just a few short and bloody years, proslavery expansionists in the West could claim more lasting victories. Slaveholders may have lost California to free labor—albeit only technically—but they continued to push their far western agenda to great effect throughout the coming decade. Between the Gadsden Purchase, the Pacific railroad surveys, the camel corps, and the Butterfield mail road, southerners set the

course of southwestern development. Northern politicians recognized as much when they attempted to derail these projects.

Taking seriously Davis's vision of western empire also offers a fresh perspective on the familiar narrative of the sectional crisis. Contrary to the standard account, slaveholders did indeed cast their gaze far beyond bleeding Kansas. As Davis's agenda makes clear, southerners transformed the Far Southwest into a sectional battleground in the decade after the Compromise of 1850. Ultimately it was a place made by slaveholders, even if the region never supported a robust system of chattel slavery. By 1860 California boasted an ardently proslavery congressional delegation; New Mexico and Utah had passed slave codes; and Arizona was arguably more "southern"—that is, more proslavery and secessionist—than the Upper South. When war broke out, Confederates justifiably looked to this region as a source of fresh recruits and as a thoroughfare to the Pacific. Even as their cause faltered in the larger theaters of the East, Davis and the Confederate high command continued to nurture their fantasies of empire in the West. Of course, these visions of empire ultimately went the way of the Confederacy as a whole. But at least for a period, it seemed as if the slave South would continue marching west.

NOTES

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1. William Need to Simon Cameron, September 27, 1861, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 50, 1:635–41 (hereafter cited as *OR*).

2. The best available treatment of Davis's western politics is William J. Cooper Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Vintage, 2001). In contrast, William C. Davis's lengthy and able biography of Davis gives scant attention to his western projects; see William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

3. Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire* (1973; repr., Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Matthew Karp, "'This Vast Southern Empire': The South and the Foreign Policy of Slavery, 1833–1861" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011). See also Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso Lopez and the First Clandestine U.S. War against Cuba* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Robert May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge,

Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008); Laura Jarnagin, *A Confluence of Transatlantic Networks: Elites, Capitalism, and Confederate Migration to Brazil* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2008); Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). For a global history of the cotton industry, though not necessarily southern imperialism, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

4. For an example of the West's absence in highly influential Civil War-era narratives, see James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

5. See, for instance, David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Jesse T. Carpenter, *The South as a Conscious Minority, 1789-1861: A Study in Political Thought* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1930, 1990). Exceptions include Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Leonard Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2007); and Howard Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). For studies of the Civil War era from a St. Louis and Colorado perspective, see Adam Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011) and Susan Schulten, "The Civil War and the Origins of the Colorado Territory," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (Spring 2013): 21-46.

6. *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., appendix, 119 (1850).

7. *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 480 (1850).

8. Waddy Thompson to Calhoun, December 18, 1847, in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Clyde N. Wilson et al., 28 vols. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959-2003), 25:20-22. See also R. H. Weightman to Henry Foote, December 16, 1851, in *Cong. Globe*, 32d Cong., 1st Sess., 754-55 (1852), for claims that "slave labor will not pay in New Mexico, and in that is comprised the whole question."

9. *New York Daily Times*, March 6, 1856.

10. *Cong. Globe*, 29th Cong., 2d Sess., 354 (1847).

11. Horace Mann to James Richardson et al., May 3, 1850, and Mann to the *Boston Atlas*, June 6, 1850, both in *Horace Mann's Letters on the Extension of Slavery into California and New Mexico; and on the Duty of Congress to Provide the Trial by Jury for Alleged Fugitive Slaves* (Washington: Buell & Blanchard, 1850), 5-7, 22.

12. Jefferson Davis to Malcolm D. Haynes, August 18, 1849, in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. Lynda L. Crist, et al., 14 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971-2015), 4:28-30 (hereafter cited as *PJD*).

13. “Statement on the Admission of California,” August 2, 1850, *PJD*, 4:124. See also Davis’s congressional speech in *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 248–50 (1850).

14. Davis, Speech at Holly Springs, October 25, 1849, and Speech at Fayette, July 11, 1851, both in *PJD*, 4:49, 194.

15. *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 1005–6 (1850).

16. John R. Bartlett to Davis, December 29, 1850, *PJD*, 4:146–47.

17. Whether or not slavery would be allowed in New Mexico and Utah was left to the territories themselves. Both Utah and New Mexico would pass slave codes, in 1852 and 1859, respectively. See below.

18. J. H. Hammond to John C. Calhoun, March 5, 1850, in *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1900), 1210; Cooper, *Jefferson Davis*, 217.

19. W. R. Isaacs MacKay to Jefferson Davis, January 13, 1857, *PJD*, 6:99–101.

20. Quoted in Robert R. Russel, *Improvement of Communication with the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics, 1783–1864* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1948), 26.

21. William Campbell Binkley, *The Expansionist Movement in Texas 1836–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925), 23; *New Orleans Bee*, May 13, 1836.

22. *Cong. Globe*, 28th Cong., 2d Sess., 218–19 (1845).

23. See *Charleston Courier*, January 12, 1847; *De Bow’s Commercial Review of the South & West*, July 1849, 22–23; also Robert S. Cotterill, “Early Agitation for a Pacific Railroad, 1845–1850,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 5 (March 1919): 396–98.

24. Robert S. Cotterill, “Southern Railroads and Western Trade, 1840–1850,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 3 (March 1917): 427–28.

25. Thomas Jefferson Green, a proslavery enthusiast and former California state senator, embraced this pejorative; see his speech on the subject in the *Texas State Gazette*, July 29, 1854.

26. In the absence of a standalone biography on Gadsden, Paul Neff Garber’s brief sketch of the South Carolinian still stands as the best available treatment; see Garber, *The Gadsden Treaty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1923), 74–80.

27. James Gadsden to M. Estes, December 10, 1851, *Charleston Courier*, February 7, 1852. See also Gadsden to Thomas Jefferson Green, December 7, 1851, William Alexander Leidesdorff Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

28. James Gadsden to Jefferson Davis, May 23, 1853, Jefferson Davis Papers, Special Collections & Archives, Transylvania University, Lexington, Ky. My thanks to Susan Brown at Transylvania University, Special Collections & Archives, for making Gadsden’s correspondence available to me. The official organ of the Mexican government immediately recognized that Gadsden’s negotiations were part of a scheme “for the construction of a Railroad from the Mississippi to the Pacific,” as quoted in the *Texas State Gazette*, September 17, 1853. See also *Freeman’s Journal*, August 11, 1853, quoted in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, August 16, 1853.

29. *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, April 11, 1854.

30. *National Era*, March 2, 1854, 34, May 4, 1854, 70.

31. *Cong. Globe*, 33d Cong., 1st Sess., appendix, 1031–36 (1854). For more on Benton, see Arenson, *Great Heart of the Republic*, 28–47.

32. For overviews of the Gadsden Treaty negotiations, see Garber, *Gadsden Treaty*; Russel, *Improvement of Communication*, 130–49 and Louis Bernard Schmidt, “Manifest Opportunity and the Gadsden Purchase,” *Arizona and the West* 3 (Autumn 1961): 245–64. Rachel St. John situates the Gadsden Purchase in the broader history of American schemes on Mexican territory; see St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 40–41.

33. The best source on these surveys remains William H. Goetzmann’s, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803–1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 262–303.

34. *Ibid.*, 266, 278. See “Report on the Secretary of War, December 3, 1855,” in *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches*, ed. Dunbar Rowland, 10 vols. (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 2:567–70.

35. Jefferson Davis, *Report of the Secretary of War on the Several Pacific Railroad Expeditions* (Washington: A. O. P. Nicholson, 1855), 8–34, 37–39.

36. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*, 300–303.

37. For the rising tide of southern railroad optimism, see Russel, *Improvement of Communication*, 161.

38. *San Antonio Ledger*, July 28, 1853. Magruder was a native Virginian and future Confederate general.

39. For invocations of “commercial empire” and the need to “bind South and West,” the rhetoric of slaveholders in the pages of *De Bow’s Review* and at the numerous southern commercial conventions of this period is explicit. See, for instance, the 1852 Southwestern Convention at New Orleans, reported in the *Arkansas Whig*, January 22, 1852; and “Southern Atlantic and Mississippi Railroad,” *De Bow’s Review* 1 (January 1846): 22–33.

40. For cost estimates, see Davis, *Report on the Several Pacific Railroad Expeditions*.

41. The Memphis convention of 1849, for instance, supported federal aid to fund the effort, especially since a railroad could not run through Texas without the revenue from the sale of public lands. See Russel, *Improvement of Communication*, 51–52. For the strict constructionist argument, see John C. Calhoun, “The Memphis Convention,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 10 (October 1846): 377–417, 442.

42. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America’s Financial Disasters* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 136.

43. On the issue of states’ rights, Davis was always a better propagandist than historian. The irony was palpable when he later attempted to explain the causes of the Civil War. “To preserve a sectional equilibrium and to maintain the equality of the States was the effort on one side [the Confederacy], to acquire empire was the manifest purpose of the other,” he wrote in his memoir. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1881), 1: vii.

44. On the federal government's role in expanding slave territory, see Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). On state rights more generally, see Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (1922; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1961), 220–44; Charles Grier Sellers Jr., “Who Were the Southern Whigs?” *American Historical Review* 59 (January 1954): 335–46; Ulrich B. Phillips, “The Central Theme of Southern History,” *American Historical Review* 34 (October 1928): 30–43.

45. This argument is made most explicitly in Frank Heywood Hodder, “The Railroad Background of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (June 1925): 3–22.

46. *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 2d Sess., 826–27 (1851).

47. Gwin noted this fact especially bitterly in his *Memoirs on the History of the United States, Mexico, and California of Ex Senator Wm. M. Gwin, Dictated by Himself for Bancroft Library*, Mss, 1878, 86.

48. Hodder, “Railroad Background of the Kansas-Nebraska Act,” 18; Russel, *Improvement of Communication*, 150–67.

49. *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong., 2d Sess., 826–27 (1851).

50. Jefferson Davis to Franklin Pierce, December 1, 1856, *PJD*, 6:86–87; Odie B. Faulk, *The U.S. Camel Corps: An Army Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 28–45; Harlan D. Fowler, *Camels to California: A Chapter in Western Transportation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1950), 9–13.

51. Jefferson Davis to William R. Cannon, December 7, 1855, *PJD*, 5:142.

52. See “Remarks of Jefferson Davis on the Pacific Railroad Bill,” Jan. 11, 1859, in *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist*, 3:453–56.

53. See Davis to Pierce, December 1, 1856, *PJD*, 6:86–87.

54. Thomas L. Connelly, “The American Camel Experiment: A Reappraisal,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 69 (April 1966): 458–60.

55. “The Late Postmaster-General, Hon. A. V. Brown,” *Harper's Weekly*, March 19, 1859, 188.

56. *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 28, 1857.

57. For background on the overland mail route and Postmaster Brown, see Dorman Winfrey, “The Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” in *Along the Early Trails of the Southwest*, ed. Wayne Gard, et al. (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1969), 22–28; David Lavender, *The American Heritage History of the Great West* (New York: American Heritage, 1965), 288; Ralph Moody, *Stagecoach West* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), 72–75.

58. Report of the Postmaster General, *Cong. Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st Sess., appendix, 27, 28 (1858).

59. *Ibid.*, 28, 27.

60. *Alexandria Gazette*, December 10, 1857; *Memphis Daily Appeal* (no date) reprinted in *Charleston Mercury*, March 8, 1858.

61. W. T. G. Weaver to *Sherman Patriot*, November 19, 1858, reprinted in *Dallas Herald*, December 15, 1858. See also *De Bow's Review*, December 1858, 719–23.

62. *National Era*, October 21, 1858, 166.
63. Quoted in Lavender, *American Heritage History of the Great West*, 288.
64. *Ohio State Journal*, March 1, 1859.
65. *National Era*, October 21, 1858, 166; see also July 16, 1857, 144, and November 4, 1858, 174.
66. *San Francisco Bulletin*, March 2, 1859; see also *Sacramento Daily Union*, October 16, 1858.
67. Quoted in Moody, *Stagecoach West*, 81.
68. *Cong. Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st Sess., appendix, 422 (1858).
69. *Cong. Globe*, 35th Cong., 2d Sess., 262–63 (1859).
70. *Cong. Globe*, 35th Cong., 2d Sess., 304–5 (1859).
71. Winfrey, “Butterfield Overland Mail Trail,” 32–44; see also Russel, *Improvement of Communication*, 224–25.
72. When Confederate general Albert Sidney Johnston fled California with a small group of fellow rebels, he traveled along the old Butterfield mail road to the Rio Grande. See Lavender, *American Heritage History of the Great West*, 314.
73. For the proslavery political climate in antebellum California, see Richards, *California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*.
74. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier*, 40; see also Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
75. Michael Magliari, “Free Soil, Unfree Labor: Cave Johnson Coutts and the Binding of Indian Workers in California, 1850–1867,” *Pacific Historical Review* 73 (August 2004): 349–90.
76. “An Act to Provide for the Protection of Property in Slaves in This Territory,” *Laws of the Territory of New Mexico, Passed by the Legislative Assembly, Session of 1858–59* (Santa Fe: A. De Marle, 1859), 64–80.
77. Miguel Antonio Otero to Charles P. Clever, December 24, 1858, William G. Ritch Collection, Huntington Library.
78. See Mark J. Stegmaier, “A Law That Would Make Caligula Blush? New Mexico Territory’s Unique Slave Code, 1859–1861,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (2012): 214–20; and Loomis Morton Ganaway, *New Mexico and the Sectional Controversy, 1846–1861* (1944; repr., Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976), 60–80.
79. *Cong. Globe*, 34th Cong., 3d Sess., 817 (1857), 35th Cong., 1st Sess., 13, 62 (1857) 35th Cong., 2d Sess., appendix, 48 (1858), 36th Cong., 2d Sess., 195–96 (1860).
80. *OR*, ser. 1, 4:39. For Arizona’s secessionist meetings, see *Mesilla Times*, March 30, 1861. Thanks to Sarah Allison, special collections librarian at New Mexico State University, for making available this scarce issue. See also Ganaway, *New Mexico and the Sectional Controversy*, 108–15.
81. Lorenzo Labadie to James L. Collins, June 16, 1861, in *When the Texans Came: Missing Records from the Civil War in the Southwest, 1861–1862*, ed. John P. Wilson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 27.
82. W. W. Mills to John S. Watts, June 23, 1861, *OR*, ser. 1, 4:56.
83. W. H. Watford, “Confederate Western Ambitions,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 44 (October 1940): 168.

84. Baylor to Gen. Earl Van Dorn, August 14, 1861, *OR*, ser. 1, 4:22–23.
85. Baylor to S. B. Davis, November 2, 1861, *OR*, ser. 1, 4:149; see also Baylor to Col. H. E. McCulloch, November 10, 1861, *OR*, ser. 1, 4:135.
86. On pro-Confederate activity within southern California, see John W. Robinson, *Los Angeles in Civil War Days, 1860–1865* (1977; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); on Baylor's conquest of Arizona, see Donald S. Frazier, *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 48–72; and W. H. Watford, "The Far-Western Wing of the Rebellion, 1861–1865," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 34 (June 1955): 130–31.
87. Quoted in James M. McPherson, *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 28, 103.
88. T. T. Teel, "Sibley's New Mexican Campaign—Its Objects and the Causes of Its Failure," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, eds. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, 4 vols. (Edison, N.J.: Castle, 1995), 2: 700.
89. Megan Kate Nelson, "Death in the Distance: Confederate Manifest Destiny and the Campaign for New Mexico, 1861–1862," in *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States*, ed. Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 33–52.
90. For more on Sibley's invasion, see Alvin M. Josephy Jr., *The Civil War in the American West* (New York: Vintage, 1991). Far more ink has been spilled on the operations of Sibley's invasion than on the deep-rooted political imperatives that set it in motion, although several accounts do provide useful background. See, for instance, Nelson, "Death in the Distance," 33–36; and Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 3–22.
91. Interview in *Alta California*, September 10, 1864. For more on this band, known as Ingram's Raiders, see John Boessenecker, *Badge and Buckshot: Lawlessness in Old California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 133–55.
92. The "The 'Southern Spy' to Abraham Lincoln, May 30, 1861, in [Edward A. Pollard], *The Southern Spy. Letters on the Policy and Inauguration of the Lincoln War. Written Anonymously in Washington and Elsewhere.* (Richmond, Va.: West & Johnston, 1862), 68.
93. Ashbury Harpending, *The Great Diamond Hoax and Other Stirring Incidents in the Life of Ashbury Harpending*, ed. James H. Wilkins (San Francisco: James H. Barry, 1913), 46–48.
94. Aurora Hunt, *The Army of the Pacific: Its Operations in California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Plains Region, Mexico, etc. 1860–1866* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1951), 305–10.
95. *Alta California*, September 9, 1863.
96. *Alta California*, March 16, 17, October 13, 1863.
97. Hunt, *Army of the Pacific*, 314–15.
98. Lansford Hastings to Jefferson Davis, December 16, 1863, *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 50, 2:700–701. See also Robinson, *Los Angeles in Civil War Days*, 142–45; and Clarence C. Clendenen, "A Confederate Spy in California: A Curious Incident of the Civil War," *Southern California Quarterly* 45 (September 1963): 225–29.

99. Baylor to James Seddon, December 21, 1864, and Baylor to Seddon, January 24, 1865, both in *OR*, ser. 4, 3:960, 1035.

100. Boyd Finch, "Arizona in Exile: Confederate Schemes to Recapture the Far Southwest," *Journal of Arizona History* 33 (Spring 1992): 81. Union reports commented anxiously on ongoing Confederate invasion plans in the Southwest well after Appomattox; see *OR*, ser. 4, 3:1168–69.