

**lendingtree**  
**Refinance Rates the Lowest in History**  
**2.46%**  
 APR  
[Calculate Payment](#)

15-Year Fixed	2.25%	2.46% APR
30-Year Fixed	2.50%	2.71% APR
5/1 ARM	2.63%	2.90% APR
\$225,000 (5/1 ARM)	\$904/mo	2.90% APR
\$350,000 (5/1 ARM)	\$1,409/mo	2.79% APR

Terms & Conditions apply. NMLSR1136

## Uprooting the Plantations

Launched to preserve slavery, the Civil War destroyed it more quickly than the natural course of events would have.

By *Edward Kosner*  
Jan. 18, 2013 2:12 pm ET

[SAVE](#) [PRINT](#) [TEXT](#)

The slave-holding American South was a plutocracy built on a monstrosity.

A self-perpetuating elite that derived both its material worth and self-worth from its dominion over millions of stolen Africans, the planters conned themselves into the social order it sustained. An absorbing social history, "The Fall of the House of Dixie" is at its best when it is teasing out what Marxists like to call the "fatal contradictions" of Southern society. Karl Marx himself has a cameo with an astute analysis of Lincoln: The president, he observed, "never ventures a step before the tide of circumstances and the general call of public opinion forbid further delay."

Three years later, most of the slave states rebelled, the newborn Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter, igniting the Civil War, and their charmed dystopia was doomed.

### THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF DIXIE

By *Bruce Levine*  
Random House, 439 pages, \$30



Waiting George N. Barnard's 'Rebel Works in Front of Atlanta, Ga. No. 1' (1864) appears in 'The Civil War and American Art' (Yale, 316 pages, \$65), the catalog for an exhibit, now on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, that reflects the sharp challenge depicting the war's unprecedented devastation posed for American artists.

THE NELSON-ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

In his accomplished new book, Bruce Levine, a history professor at the University of Illinois, tells the story of the Civil War's inexorable destruction of slavery and the social order it sustained. An absorbing social history, "The Fall of the House of Dixie" is at its best when it is teasing out what Marxists like to call the "fatal contradictions" of Southern society. Karl Marx himself has a cameo with an astute analysis of Lincoln: The president, he observed, "never ventures a step before the tide of circumstances and the general call of public opinion forbid further delay."

Indeed, for readers whose Civil War bibliography runs to standard works by Bruce Catton and James McPherson—with an audio-visual assist from Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln"—Mr. Levine's book offers fresh insights into the complex reality of what most Northerners thought of as the solid South and the slow evolution of the Union crusade against slavery.

The scope of slavery at its crest in the decade before Fort Sumter was as vast as it was appalling. In 1858, writes Mr. Levine, there were nearly 60,000 Americans who owned at least 20 slaves. Three thousand men owned 100 or more, and one Georgia planter boasted 1,500 human chattels spread over several properties. In all, there were four million slaves in the states that would form the Confederacy and elsewhere in the Union and its territories. They were valued at the equivalent of \$83 billion in today's dollars. The cotton they raised represented fully half of the exports of the young republic, mostly to Britain's "dark satanic mills."

The power of the slave interests was as much political as it was economic. Of the 15 presidents before Lincoln, all but three—the two Adamases and William Henry Harrison, who died after just a month in office—were slave owners or their enablers. Across the South, planters dominated state houses, local governments and congressional delegations.

But the grip of slavery on the slave holders went beyond economic and political power. The slave system, Mr. Levine writes, was "the unique basis of the particular outlook, assumptions, norms, habits and relationships to which masters as a social class had become deeply and reflexively attached. It defined their privileges and shaped their culture, their religion and even their personalities." The men of the South came from "a master race," proclaimed Georgia's Gov. George Fitzhugh in 1861. And many used their power, most conspicuously, to exercise sexual mastery over the slave women on their plantations.

From the beginning of the rebellion, slave interests called the shots. Of the 50 delegates from the deep South who met in Montgomery, Ala., in February 1861 to explore secession, 49 were slave owners, 21 of them planters. The millions of Southerners from the hill country and the border states who couldn't afford slave labor or had no need for it on their hardscrabble farms were unrepresented. This fundamental conflict of interest would undermine the Southern cause, shape the destiny of the rebel army and ultimately contribute as much to the fall of Dixie as Lincoln's blue host.

None of this was clear to most people at the start of the war. Southern aristocrats were certain that their slaves would stand with them and that their martial young men would obliterate the ragtag Northern armies poised on their borders—in a month or two at most. Initially, Lincoln's aim was simply to restore the union and bar the further spread of slavery. He was so concerned to keep slave-holding Kentucky in the Union as a base to attack the upper South that he muffled any talk of abolition.

A few knew better. The most prescient was Frederick Douglass, the vibrant ex-slave turned abolitionist orator. "The Negro is the key of the situation—the pivot upon which the whole rebellion turns," he said in 1861. "The inexorable logic of events," he predicted, would drive Lincoln to make the eradication of slavery the spear point of the war.

That is indeed what happened. Early Confederate victories at Bull Run in 1861 and 1862 and elsewhere forced Lincoln's hand. First, slaves were declared "contraband of war"—not freed but ruled to be enemy property eligible for seizure by Union forces. By July 1862, Congress had ordered that slaves of rebel owners "shall be deemed captives of war and shall be forever free." The president himself declared: "We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Six months later, Union troops handed out a million copies of the Emancipation Proclamation throughout the South as thousands of blacks abandoned their masters and fled to the Union columns.

Helpless in the grip of their own self-delusion, the slave owners undermined their own cause. Even as their armies bent under fierce Union attack, they refused to lend their slaves to build defenses or toil behind the lines. Instead, they "refugeed" tens of thousands across the Mississippi to Texas, out of easy reach of Union forces. They allowed planters' sons to buy their way out of serving and resisted desperate measures by Jefferson Davis's government to raise food and other supplies from the plantations. To the end, they refused to give guns to their slaves and press them into combat, even after Lincoln armed the freed slaves and other blacks and formed them into effective regiments.

These actions only aggravated the class conflict between the slavocracy and the poor whites, who realized that they were fighting and dying to preserve the wealth and social order of the haughty rich. One man in the ditches of Georgia wrote that his comrades were "tired of fighting for this negro aristocracy [sic]." Another said: "I would not give my life for all the Blame negroes in the Confederacy." As the rebellion spiraled down, they fled the ranks. Some formed guerrilla bands and fought their ex-comrades. A plantation mistress confided to her diary, "we have almost as much to dread from our own demoralized mob as from the public enemy."

By the end of the war, a third to a half of the Confederate army had deserted, and more than 300,000 Southern whites were fighting for the Union. In Montgomery, the planters and their ladies danced on the lip of the volcano. "We eat, drink, laugh, dance in lightness of heart," one woman reported. A few months later, Robert E. Lee surrendered what remained of his Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox.

Mr. Levine calls the transformation of the South through the abolition of slavery "the second American revolution." It was, of course, incomplete. The impulse to give the freedmen confiscated plantation land so that they could establish economic independence to match their new liberty never got traction. Instead, slavery was replaced by serfdom in the guise of tenant farming that bound the ex-slaves to the land nearly as tightly as the master's chains. Within a generation, the remnants of the Southern white aristocracy found common cause with their poor white brethren to subjugate the blacks once more through Jim Crow laws that thwarted the newly liberated. It would take the better part of another century of struggle to make fresh progress in redeeming Lincoln's original promise.

An accomplished ironist, Mr. Levine recognizes how the South defeated itself more effectively than the zeal and industrial might of the Union. "A war launched to preserve slavery," he writes, "succeeded instead in abolishing that institution more rapidly and radically than would have occurred otherwise." Or, as South Carolina plantation mistress Mary Chesnut lamented: "Our world has gone to destruction."

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

### SPONSORED OFFERS

<b>WALMART:</b> Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments	<b>KOHL'S:</b> 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon	<b>EXPEDIA:</b> Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings
<b>EBAY:</b> Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon	<b>HOME DEPOT:</b> 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code	<b>TARGET:</b> \$15 gift card with Spectra breast pump - Target offer

### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- Are Florida Schools Reopening? Parents Can't Tell as State and Districts Fight
- A Deadly Coronavirus Was Inevitable. Why Was No One Ready?
- S&P 500 Rally but Closes Below a Record
- Israel, U.A.E. Agree to Establish Formal Diplomatic Ties
- Joe Biden-Kamala Harris Ticket Makes Debut After Historic VP Pick
- Beirut Explosion Unleashes Public Anger at Hezbollah, Lebanon's Most Powerful Group
- Why Is It Hard to Get a Rapid Covid-19 Test? The Machines Are in Short Supply
- Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relive the Flying Experience
- Real Businesses Snares Hunt for Coronavirus Loan Scammers
- "The Gold Standard": Why Chinese Startups Still Flock to the U.S. for IPOs

[BACK TO TOP](#)

<b>WSJ Membership</b> WSJ+ Membership Benefits Subscription Options Why Subscribe? Corporate Subscriptions Professor Journal Student Journal WSJ High School Program WSJ Amenity Program WSJ Live	<b>Customer Service</b> Customer Center Contact Us	<b>Tools &amp; Features</b> Emails & Alerts Guides My News RSS Feeds Video Center Watchlist Podcasts	<b>Ads</b> Advertise Commercial Real Estate Ads Place a Classified Ad Sell Your Business Sell Your Home Recruitment & Career Ads Coupons	<b>More</b> About the Newsroom Content Partnerships Corrections Jobs at WSJ Masthead News Archive Register for Free Reprints Buy Issues
--	--	---	---	--