

The Today's Issues group has been part of our church for more than ten years, but attendance is dwindling. New members may not understand what the group is about, others may have forgotten.

I would like to share a brief description written by Pat McGovern (1930 to 2013), Pat was the founding organizer of the group and we still miss him very much.

So, exactly what is the “Today’s Issues” group?

by L. P. McGovern

You may have noticed “Today’s Issues” listed at 9:30 a.m. each Sunday on the weekly schedule. The “Today’s Issues” group meets in the front parlor of the RE Building.

“Today’s Issues” used to be known as Adult RE, until we gave up that title because it no longer really applied. Now there’s a separate group with the Adult RE title.

The “Today’s Issues” group only occasionally discusses strictly religious topics. Religion is not our sole, nor even frequent, topic.

Nevertheless, we see ourselves as within the UU framework because we feel we are practicing “the free and disciplined search for truth” every Sunday (to quote our affirmation).

This may sound like a lofty goal for a smallish Sunday morning discussion group, and it probably is, but, nevertheless, we attempt it every Sunday – and have a good time doing so.

These days, our search for truth takes us to the pages of The New York Review of Books (NYROB). NYROB is issued on a bi-weekly schedule and features reviews of books on a wide variety of topics. A good example is a review the group discussed on June 6 of the book by Michael Lewis called The Big Short. In my opinion, this article represents the best point-by-point explanation of the financial manipulations that led to the recent economic collapse. It furnished an excellent basis for discussion.

Since the reviews deal with a wide variety of topics, we feel that NYROB is a very good source of material. On the other hand, we have discussed complete books on several occasions. We find, however, that ideas in books can be repeated from chapter to chapter and thus spark no new talking points.

In a sense, the reviews in NYROB constitute a concentrated source of ideas. We take this approach because we feel that a discussion needs a specific basis or the conversation gets out of hand and becomes too centrifugal.

Most of us view the discussion as recreational, say like a more sedentary Sunday morning tennis match. There is disagreement in the discussion. We don't feel that just sitting around, nodding our heads in agreement would be much fun Sunday after Sunday. But we try not to be too disagreeable with our disagreements. We also make room for occasional personal anecdotes, although overuse of this privilege is discouraged.

Occasionally, one of the NYROB articles represents a review of an artistic event – such as a recent showing by the 20th century Russian painter Chagall. When we discussed the Chagall article, member-in-good-standing Ernie Novak gave us a PowerPoint presentation of Chagall's works. Ernie has presented other artists as well – much to our delight.

So, if you feel like recreational discussion, read the articles that are listed ahead each week and make an appearance in the front parlor at the appointed hour. We'll welcome you there.

For this Sunday, Feb 2, 2020, the group will carry on this tradition by discussing two essays from the New York Review of Books:

From page 29 of the January 16 edition, David Blight, "A Doubtful Freedom," a review of a book called *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* by Andrew Delbanco

From page 12 of the February 13 edition, Jessica Mathews, "[Do the Democrats Have a Foreign Policy](#)," a discussion of the foreign policy ideas of the current Democratic presidential candidates.

"Do the Democrats Have a Foreign Policy can be read on the NYROB web site without a password, [just click here](#).

A copy of "A Doubtful Freedom" is attached. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion at 9:30 in the parlor of the RE building on Sunday.

'A Doubtful Freedom'

David W. Blight JANUARY 16, 2020 ISSUE

The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War

by Andrew Delbanco

Penguin, 453 pp., \$30.00; \$18.00 (paper)

A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves, circa 1862; a painting by Eastman Johnson
Brooklyn Museum

Eastman Johnson: A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves, circa 1862

That the United States has been a “nation” since its founding—struggling through slavery, civil conflict, labor strife, economic depressions, and deep ethnic and racial divisions but still surviving as a single polity and people—has long been an article of faith in triumphal versions of our history. “We the People” have often needed a sense of our long continuity if we wished to hold ourselves together. A story, true and false, imagined or otherwise, with remembrance and a good deal of forgetting is perhaps the only thing that can unify a nation. Before he became president, Barack Obama inspired many of us with his clarion call in 2004 that “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America.” In these recent polarized years we’ve seen bitter refutations of this premise, even as its noble impulse survives. Just now the idea of the American nation needs serious attention from historians.

In 1830 the Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster famously pronounced his dedication to “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable,” under the tremendous pressure of sectional division between North and South over tariffs, states’ rights, and slavery. In the midst of the 1832 nullification crisis, a confrontation over South Carolina’s resistance to federal tariffs and fear of how they would affect cotton prices, Webster warned that disunion would mean “states dissevered, discordant, belligerent; on a land rent with civil feuds, or drenched...in fraternal blood.”¹ Twenty years later, he stood in the Senate to support the Fugitive Slave Act—a law, widely loathed in his state, requiring that all citizens and officials of free states cooperate in returning escaped slaves to their masters through special new magistrates—while trying to save the Union in the Compromise of 1850.

The Compromise grew out of westward expansion following the Mexican War in the late 1840s, which raised the question of whether slavery would exist in California or any new state formed in the vast southwest territories gained from Mexico. In close sectionalized rather than partisan votes, Congress admitted California as a free state, set new borders for Texas, and opened up the entire southwest to the possible expansion of slavery, while ending slave-trading in the District of Columbia. Congress also passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed Southerners to think that they had secured a federal legal system by which to retrieve their runaway “property.” The Compromise, however, was a weak and untenable settlement of the slavery question, and it backfired by stimulating a more militant antislavery movement. This time, the patriotic urge for union ultimately failed, and a decade later the nation collapsed and descended into civil war.

A United States? Has it ever been truly thus? Well, yes, at times, depending on whom you ask. Was it united before the cataclysm of the Civil War and its aftermath prompted the crafting of a second American Constitution in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—amounting to a second republic, out of the ashes of slavery and bloodshed? In *The War Before the War*, Andrew Delbanco replies with a determined no to the question of whether antebellum America had ever been truly united.

Delbanco, a distinguished literary historian, argues that, compared with all the other crises facing the young American republic, nothing produced an irresolvable “maelstrom of contradiction” more than the question of fugitive slaves. The existence of slavery was challenge

enough to the integrity of the Union, but what crystalized its threat from the beginning was the clash between “feeling” and “duty,” between morality and law regarding what to do about escaping slaves. Did they belong to the slaveholders and therefore need to be retrieved and returned according to the laws governing private property, or were they to be treated as human beings exercising the same natural rights the founders had claimed as justification for their revolt against Britain?

Delbanco writes lyrically and with presentist passion about this basic American paradox, which threatened national comity for almost the first hundred years of the Union. “The fugitive slave story,” he contends, “is a rhyming story. It is impossible to follow it without hearing echoes in our own time.” But also, in his own personal way, he respects those in the middle, the compromisers like Webster who could never resolve this struggle on the country’s journey to national shipwreck. It might seem odd that moderates could be not only tragic losers but also flawed heroes. Compromise, once an honored American tradition for better or for worse (and it produced both), is no longer an esteemed political practice. Delbanco argues for respect for the “miserable centrists” of history (Isaiah Berlin’s phrase for certain of his cold war contemporaries), even as he chastises the hypocrisy of slaveholding advocates of liberty.

Delbanco also writes with a genuine sense of tragedy, and no small dose of indignation, about this story. The founders who crafted the Constitution had compromise “in their DNA.” Yet among the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution, nothing animated the interests of the many slaveholders from the South in their midst more than the right to retrieve their fugitive slave “property,” thus forcing concessions from Northern nonslaveholders. Delbanco contends that without the fugitive slave clause, as Article 4, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution has become known, the whole document could not have been achieved in 1787. The founders’ complicity with slavery while they embraced “liberty” and created a republic is not quite what Delbanco calls the “compulsory question with no satisfactory answer.” The great historian Edmund Morgan concluded that these slaveholding republicans believed deeply in white liberty and black unfreedom, and as eighteenth-century landowners understood their own dire need for a permanent, dependent labor force to sustain their economic world.² The awful contradiction within the inception of the American nation is not so mysterious when we examine its nexus of racism and greed.

Many bargains characterized the original Constitution. Delbanco looks carefully at James Madison’s work in imagining the structure of the Constitution, noting that the slaveholding Virginian, who would later bring some of his own slaves to Washington, D.C., as president, left this remarkable claim in private notes: “It would be wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men.” It can be painful to read Madison’s tortured assertions that slaves were, in his view, both property and persons. A slave was “compelled to labor, not for himself...vendible by one master to another master,...restrained in his liberty and chastised in his body.” But, Madison maintained, the slave was not “degraded from the human rank...[was] protected...not as a part of the irrational creation...[but] as a moral person.” Delbanco calls such positions “a perverse version of the founders’ vaunted ideal of the ‘prudent mean.’”

At the same time, today we need the reminder that the nature of federalism—the attempted balancing of state and federal power—at the heart of the Constitution is itself rooted in the protection of slavery. Our ongoing struggle over states' rights owes much to its origins in Madison's and other founders' insistence on local control of their chattel in moral persons.

Whether this was a matter of principle or politics for Madison may be beside the point. Delbanco shows how the Constitution's main author embodied the contradiction at the same time that he may have provided later abolitionists a means to harness, rather than only condemn, the founding document. Many, especially Frederick Douglass, did just that, hoping to get the authority of the Bill of Rights and the plea for a "more perfect union" on the side of the antislavery cause. We have never stopped arguing about whether the Constitution was fundamentally proslavery—in effectively sustaining the system—or whether it contained antislavery elements that were revealed over time.³ What we do know is that eventually a strong segment of political abolitionists forged an antislavery interpretation of the Constitution that energized the original Republican Party and helped foment disunion.

Delbanco wrote a marvelous biography of Herman Melville, among other works in literary history.⁴ He often alludes to poets and novelists in this history of strife over the fate of fugitive slaves. As a literary scholar, Delbanco values ambiguity, the confounding character of irony. When it comes to responsibility for slavery's overwhelming power in our national history, he rejects simple fables of good and evil. The book is laced with lines such as this, from Melville's 1849 novel *Mardi*: "Humanity cries out against this vast enormity, but not one man knows a prudent remedy."

Before the war, when Douglass was a radical abolitionist, his solutions for slavery could rarely be called prudent. Delbanco uses the words of this great master of rhetoric as a leitmotif in the book to illustrate the sheer savagery of the irony about slavery in a new country that celebrated itself for its historic freedoms. "We could see no spot this side of the ocean, where we could be free," wrote Douglass in his first autobiography, in which he described his own experience of having been born into slavery. "We knew nothing about Canada.... At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol." In Douglass's voice one finds the heart of this American tragedy: "On the one hand, there stood slavery, glaring frightfully upon us.... On the other hand, away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star...stood a doubtful freedom—half frozen—beckoning us to come." For fugitives like Douglass, the nation's devotion to prudence and the law became irrelevant.

Delbanco concludes that slavery in America constituted a "maximum-security prison" for a race of black people in a land where most whites were free to pursue happiness and their constitutional rights. Fugitive slaves were the moving, breathing, bleeding refutations of a unified America. They had few weapons other than their courage and their bodies in their "war" against an emergent disunited nation.

Fugitive slaves, their place on the legal road to disunion, and their actual experiences, expressed in the tradition of the slave narratives, have long interested historians of antebellum America. In a recent book, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom*, R.J.M. Blackett brilliantly and painstakingly probes the story of fugitive slave escapes in the border states as well as the system of adjudication put in place by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that was designed to return them to slavery.⁵ His book complements Delbanco's sweeping story with individual tales of the work of the "commissioners" established by the act, magistrates appointed to prosecute runaways at the demands of their alleged owners. Under the law, many fugitives were returned to slavery either without due process or after a hearing, while almost as many were forcefully freed by the black community, ransomed by abolitionists, or, in a few cases, "acquitted" of their crime of flight. Blackett too finds it inevitable that the fugitive slave crisis first made the federal Union insecure and eventually impossible to sustain. After 1850, the resulting conflict fundamentally challenged the idea of the rule of law, fomented widespread mob violence by black and white Northerners attempting to rescue jailed runaways, and strongly affected social order. Delbanco writes:

The inconsistencies and paradoxes of the fugitive slave problem were by no means limited to the sphere of politics. Men and women from all walks of life were pulled into a maelstrom of contradiction as they tried to come to terms with it.... One judge who sent fugitives back to their masters countenanced the harboring of runaways in his own home.

Delbanco is interested in what he calls the "felt significance" of the fugitive slave crisis on a national scale. Runaway bondsmen cost slaveholders money, but their importance "grew far out of proportion to their numbers or the dollars they represented." In a telling line, he adds, "In the grim work of tabulating the human cost of slavery, cold calculations never tell much about the heat of feeling." Feeling is at the heart of politics, and fugitive slaves became big politics. In the early 1850s a great number of fugitive slave stories made the news, including the highly publicized rescue cases of Shadrach Minkens (successful) and Anthony Burns (unsuccessful) in Boston, or the Christiana "riot" in Pennsylvania that ended in the death of a slaveholder and his bondsmen's escape to Canada, or the rescue and flight north of the border of a bondsman known as Jerry from Syracuse, New York.

The War Before the War presents a clear narrative of the legal and political history of an increasingly polarized dispute over fugitives. This is what he means by "the war before the war," starting with the Constitution, through the Northwest Ordinance (which had its own escaped slave provision), to early resistance from Northern states in personal liberty laws that defied federal enforcement, and to the highly divisive Fugitive Slave Act and the subsequent explosion of rescues and political turmoil. A stark divide emerged in the early 1850s between the more visible morality of the panting runaway and the South's demand to enforce the "law" and return their "property." As Delbanco puts it, "before the fugitive slave law, northerners could pretend that slavery had nothing to do with them. After the fugitive slave law, there was no evading their complicity." Delbanco notes that some of the South's most ardent defenders of slavery were "wary" of the law: "Because slave owners thought of themselves as a besieged 'minority'

vulnerable to the expansion of federal power, there was risk in allowing the federal government ‘to assume control over the slave property.’”

Delbanco contends that however much they tried, America’s political institutions—parties, Congress, the courts, and successive presidents—could not contain a conflict demanding two separate futures. He implies more support for the right of secession than likely existed in the general population by the late 1850s. Americans were surely divided, but secession was a revolutionary act, as the leaders of the Confederacy were to learn. Extreme advocates of the Tenth Amendment who claimed to be defending merely the principle of states’ rights would have their deeper imperatives exposed as proslavery ideology and white supremacy once the question was tested in war.

Delbanco invokes Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that the United States was really only “twenty-four little sovereign nations.” He nicely uses Ralph Waldo Emerson’s description of the Fugitive Slave Act: an attempt to affirm “an intimate union between two countries, one civilized & Christian & the other barbarous.” Emerson described that hated law as a “university to the people” in the North for its galvanizing effects, converting many overnight to some level of antislavery or anti-Southern sentiment. After Henry Clay’s famous presentation of the Fugitive Slave Act in the Senate in 1850, the young Walt Whitman published a poem in *The New York Evening Post*, “Song for Certain Congressmen”:

Beyond all such we know a term,
Charming to ears and eyes,
With it we’ll stab young Freedom,
And do it in disguise;
...That term is “compromise.”

And even the conservative, anti-abolitionist Nathaniel Hawthorne, writing to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1851, admitted that “this Fugitive Law is the only thing that could have blown me into any respectable degree of warmth on this great subject of the day.”

So steeped is Delbanco in the literature of the American Renaissance that one might mistakenly think it is not necessary to look at Congress or presidents at all to follow the road to disunion. His reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as a source for understanding public opinion about fugitive slaves is, however, particularly splendid. Delbanco shows how Stowe used Christian iconography—the escaped slave Eliza fleeing with her baby over the ice floes, and Tom as the suffering Christ—in order “to overcome the obstruction of sympathy by reason.” Stowe herself had used the language of iconography in proposing the book to her publisher: “My vocation is simply that of painter,” she wrote, because “there is no arguing with pictures.” Delbanco quotes Douglass discussing the power of imagery to change minds, and notes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* evokes “through word-pictures the pathos of a hunted mother and the pity of a god-man crucified.” Eliza as a fictional character was, we must remember, the most

famous runaway slave in America, more so even than Douglass. Delbanco asserts that “implicit in every word of [Stowe’s] devastating book” was the idea that slavery could only die in violence.

In an intriguing aside, he contends that Melville based Captain Ahab directly on the figure of John C. Calhoun, the South’s and slavery’s most notorious defender and a crucial proponent of the Fugitive Slave Law. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is Delbanco’s serious engagement with and analysis of Calhoun’s place in history—the political philosopher of proslavery ideology as well as the “two nations” conception of America. Ahab has been likened to everyone from Hitler to terrorists. But by arguing for Calhoun as the model for Ahab, Delbanco suggests that the slavery crisis was woven through Melville’s philosophical masterpiece about the human condition.

So determined is Delbanco to make this history a template for our current political condition that he uses familiar analogies throughout the book. Most succeed. In effect, he is having a conversation with his reader about today’s deeply divided society, by means of the fugitive slave issue and the way it tore America apart more than 150 years ago. Slaveowners of the early republic were “like opponents of gun-control laws today”; they opposed any restriction of slave-trading lest it lead to general abolition. To Delbanco, a fugitive walking about the free black community of early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia faced the same fearful prospect of any “young African American man” now who “lowers his gaze, walks in the shadows, suppresses his rage if frisked by police”; he “relives in some measure the demeaning—or deadly—experience of his forebears.” Still, likening the Georgian Alexander H. Stephens’s speech in Congress condemning the Mexican War in 1846 as an overextension of American power to opposition to George W. Bush’s Iraq War is a bit of a stretch. And to understand the nature and reach of the “Slave Power” in the South’s quest for expansion, readers may not necessarily need an analogy to the Nazis’ “quest for Lebensraum.”

Delbanco is right to remind us that the distrust, invective, and sheer hatred in politicians’ debates, “even in the age of Trump,” are not as bad as they were in the slavery crises of the 1850s. He demonstrates how the basic value of civility, a decent respect for the humanity of one’s political opponents, and a willingness to accept policy defeat died in the late 1850s. “Comity,” Delbanco argues, “is as fragile as it is precious. In America, in the 1850s, it collapsed.”

He is also right to compare today’s persistent flow of refugees, whether in the Middle East or at America’s southern border, to the frightened, intrepid migrants on fugitive slave routes into the North or to Canada. The urge to escape bondage, war, starvation, and terror is universal throughout human history. Delbanco is correct that one of the “most demanding challenges” of writing history is “explaining how people in the past could have failed to see what seems so clear to us in retrospect.” He writes with great zeal, while trying to empathize with losers and winners, and even with the prophets of evil.

A major strength of this book is the writing itself. After quoting Douglass’s haunting expressions about being essentially motherless in his early youth—“never having enjoyed...her soothing

presence”—the historian channels the voice of the former slave to convey his message. “Slavery robs mothers of their motherhood,” writes Delbanco,

and thereby stunts the souls of their sons. It turns motherless black boys into heartless black men. Beware of the dark millions headed toward manhood: they will grow into potency with no sense of empathy or love. Slavery is a factory for manufacturing monsters.

Such grim language will not please everyone in today’s climate, but it wakes you up. By the 1840s, living, breathing fugitive slaves enlivened and reshaped the typical antislavery meeting. These meetings took on the tenor, in Delbanco’s words, of “a secular communion in which the sacramental moment arrives when a flesh-and-blood runaway stands before the congregation as a living crucifix and begins to speak.”

The War Before the War also delivers a strong analysis of the role of slave narratives—for example, the best-sellers written by Josiah Henson, William Wells Brown, Solomon Northup, and of course Douglass—in the public crisis over fugitive slaves. Douglass in particular broke through to a large audience and established trust in these extraordinary, unusual texts. Delbanco’s claim that the narratives were “more than propaganda but less than literature” will get firm disagreement from other literary historians. But he shows how the slave narratives were crucial to public debate: “They moved public opinion” and assured that their legions of readers could never again “browse through the runaway newspaper ads” without knowing their deeper meaning—these were human beings risking all to be free. And some of them, like Douglass, wrote in unforgettable, lyrical prose.

Delbanco’s ultimate aim is to trace how, in his view, the fugitive slave question made a genuine nation, rooted in unity and comity, “impossible” from the beginning. That conclusion needs more measure, more careful attention to events over time. In Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay “Historical Inevitability,” the philosopher cautioned that history does not unfold like machinery. There are many forces at play in shaping history, and no one of them is “ultimately responsible for everything.” Historians do search for and explain “patterns,” but each time we find one we ought to expect it to flow into and out of the next. Beware our certainties, Berlin demands; history seeks no “goal.” We should especially beware an “irresistible rhythm,” even when we find one as telling as the persistent conflict over slavery and escaped slaves before our Civil War.⁶

This is not an ideologically deterministic book. But the “war” before the Civil War had so many political, legal, and human skirmishes that we ought never to see the actual war as completely inevitable. Inevitable when and why? Strife and conflict, moral and legal, became unstoppable. But the war between armies is another matter. This indeed may be Delbanco’s point in this sweeping and fascinating book, despite his title and his own use of the language of inevitability. His is a long, festering story of political disunion, mapped through many voices. But if we do not stop frequently on this road to disunion and dwell on the details, we will miss what Lincoln meant in 1855 when he remarked, “The great body of the Northern people do crucify their

feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union.” Self-tortured by the slavery question, a “nation” descended into disunion.

1

Daniel Webster debated Robert Y. Hayne in the US Senate, 1830. The Webster–Hayne debate famously engaged states’ rights, nullification, and the nature of the Union. ↵

2

Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (Norton, 1975). “To a large degree it may be said that Americans bought their independence with slave labor,” wrote Morgan. “The paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves.” ↵

3

See the review in these pages by Nicholas Guyatt of Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man* (Harvard University Press, 2018), June 6, 2019, and the subsequent exchange of letters between Wilentz, Guyatt, and James Oakes, June 27, 2019. ↵

4

See the review of *Melville: His World and Work* (Knopf, 2005) by Frederick C. Crews in these pages, December 1, 2005. ↵

5

Cambridge University Press, 2018; reviewed in these pages by James Oakes, “The Power of Running Away,” December 6, 2018. ↵

6

“Historical Inevitability,” in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 131. ↵
