

## John Stuart Mill

Timothy Larsen traces Mill's contribution to developing Liberal support for the North in the American Civil War.

# John Stuart Mill, moral outrage

**J**OHNS STUART MILL was the most eminent British intellectual to support the side of the North in the American Civil War empathetically, publicly, and already in the early part of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> As to the Liberal Party, although a minority, there were a sprinkling of other prominent figures who took an early pro-North stance, including even cabinet ministers W. E. Forster and the Duke of Argyll. The other obvious person of Mill's stature, in terms of being a voice to the people, to do the same was John Bright – one can see Bright as the greatest Liberal orator on the side of the Union in parliament and Mill as the most important voice in the press. Moreover, Mill is not just any Liberal, he is one of the most influential thinkers in the entire tradition, so much so that some have even suggested that he deserves the title of 'the father of modern liberalism.'<sup>2</sup>

Setting these two realities side by side is particularly intriguing because, in contrast to Mill, key Liberal leaders at the time of the conflict were, at the very least, prepared to move toward acquiescing in the secession of the Southern states and recognising the Confederacy as a sovereign, independent nation, including the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary (and next prime minister), Lord Russell, and the chancellor of the exchequer (and the next Liberal prime minister after Russell), W. E. Gladstone. Mill himself fumed that, as he saw it, even Liberals were opposing the liberal side in the conflict:

Why is the general voice of our press, the general sentiment of our people, bitterly reproachful to the North, while for the South, the aggressors in the war, we have either mild apologies or direct and downright encouragement? and this not only from the Tory and anti-democratic camp, but from Liberals, or *soi-disant* such?<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this article is to explore Mill's reaction to the American Civil War, both in its own right, and as a way of examining and pondering certain ways of being Liberal that

it represents. A whole range of issues were at stake in the war and in Britain's response to it, including the question of tariffs, national honour and pre-existing tensions in Anglo-American political relations, the spread of democracy, the goal of preserving the Union, and the issues of states' rights and limited government. At least in his own private thinking, Mill himself recognised the reality of these other issues to a certain extent. Nevertheless, this article will argue that Mill sought to define the conflict as one against slavery in order to advance the cause of the North from the high ground of morality – of right feeling – to which one could at least affect to maintain that mere matters of policy ought to bow. Mill thereby played an early and significant part in Liberalism's moral turn.

The one other issue, besides slavery, to which Mill also paid considerable attention was democracy: he was convinced that if the North failed in its struggle, then the cause of democracy throughout the world would be set back. In his *Autobiography*, Mill retrospectively reported that he opposed the Confederacy because he knew that, if it was victorious, it 'by destroying for a long time the prestige of the great democratic republic would give to all the privileged classes of Europe a false confidence.'<sup>4</sup> Brent E. Kinser, in an insightful, book-length exploration of this connection, *The American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy*, observes that much of what British intellectuals 'had to say about the American conflict was meant to be read in terms of the discussions surrounding reform in Britain.'<sup>5</sup> Hugh Dubrulle has likewise observed that the war was filtered through the question of 'Britain's destiny as an Americanised society.'<sup>6</sup> In September 1862, Mill asserted privately that, if the North should triumph, the Tories 'will be mortified that what they absurdly think an example of the failure of democracy should be exchanged for a splendid example of its success.'<sup>7</sup> More bluntly, Mill repeatedly referred to *The Times* and the Tories and others who sympathised with the Confederacy as 'those who hate democracy.'<sup>8</sup> To make

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# Mill and the American Civil War



John Stuart Mill  
(1806–73), 1865 (John  
Watkins, London  
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London)

the contrast even neater, Mill insisted that the Southern states were a region of America that, unlike the North, had been ‘founded on aristocratic principles.’<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth bearing in mind that the extension of the franchise in Britain was a prime political preoccupation of Mill’s throughout the stretch of years that included

the American Civil War, from his *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* (1859) to the Second Reform Act of 1867. Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) was published during the war, and he was actively scheming on this issue throughout the conflict. For instance, Mill wrote to William Rathbone, Jr., in November 1863:

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Nothing can be more true than your observations on the importance of having a definite plan of constitutional reform grounded on intelligible principles, to present to the nation at the time (perhaps not far distant) when the temporary indifference to the subject will have given place to a renewed and possibly an eager interest in it. The ruling classes are singularly short-sighted in not perceiving that they will certainly, in no long time, have to deal with a reaction of this nature. But they have been in a fool's paradise ever since they succeeded in stifling Lord Russell's reform bill ...<sup>10</sup>

During the last months of the war, Mill agreed to stand for parliament as a Liberal candidate for Westminster. In a telling indication of what he thought the agenda for the next parliament would be, he responded to the invitation by saying that he was willing to represent 'the Reform party'.<sup>11</sup>

One can even see the two causes overlapping. Thomas Bayley Potter, for example, had founded the Union and Emancipation Society, which, of course, Mill fully supported. In March 1865, however, when the Union victory was clear and the end of the war just a few weeks away, Mill counselled Potter to turn next towards giving leadership to the cause of reform in Britain.<sup>12</sup> In his published article, 'The Contest in America', Mill warned that far from being on the side of a wide franchise, the Confederacy stood for a theory of human relations that would deprive the British masses of even their existing rights: 'And the doctrine is loudly preached through the new Republic, that slavery, whether black or white, is good in itself, and is the proper condition of the working classes everywhere.'<sup>13</sup> Other Liberals were making such connections as well. John Bright, for instance, praised the workmen of Birmingham who had donated to help relieve the suffering in Lancashire due to the Cotton Famine caused by the war, before making this pointed dig: 'He was only sorry that every one of the men who thus nobly subscribed had not his name on the register of electors, and was not enabled to give his free vote at the polls.'<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Gladstone would argue after the war that the way that the Lancashire workers stood for principle over self-interest in such a costly way proved that they were worthy of being entrusted with the vote.<sup>15</sup> The causes of the Union in America and of franchise extension in Britain were deeply intertwined.

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and that insight can serve as an apt transition to Mill's emphatic insistence that the conflict in America was about slavery.<sup>16</sup> Mill's influential, initial intervention to guide British opinion on the American war was an article in February 1862 in *Fraser's Magazine*: 'The Contest in America'. Its primary purpose was to answer the numerous voices in Britain, including many weighty ones, who denied that the war was about slavery. Mill was resolute in his insistence that Britons see the issue clearly for what it really was:

The world knows what the question between the North and South has been for many years, and still is. Slavery alone was thought of, alone talked of. Slavery was battled for and against, on the floor of Congress and in the plains of Kansas; on the Slavery question exclusively was the party constituted which now rules the United States: on slavery Fremont was rejected, on slavery Lincoln was elected; the South separated on slavery, and proclaimed slavery as the one cause of separation.<sup>17</sup>

Mill's other main public intervention in this debate appeared later that same year, in the October 1862 issue of the *Westminster Review*: 'The Slave Power'. This was in the form of a review of a book by the same name written by J. E. Cairnes. The book's subtitle ended: '*Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues in the American Contest*'. Mill had encouraged Cairnes to write it, and *The Slave Power* made a sustained argument, girded up by political economy, for the position that the war was about the institution of slavery.

The need to get this vital point drummed into obdurate heads sometimes tempted Mill not only to ignore, downplay, or set aside other relevant issues at stake in the war and in Britain's response to it, but even to elide some of the complexities of the conflict. For example, he would refer to the Union side as 'the Free States', and even did so in 'The Contest in America'.<sup>18</sup> Those were not synonyms, however, and therefore such terminology was inaccurate. Indeed, the very capital of the United States, Washington DC, was slave territory, as were four states in the Union: Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware. Likewise, Mill could refer to the Southern side as 'the Slaveholders' even though less than a third of white households in the Confederacy owned slaves.<sup>19</sup> Mill's motivation, of course, was to keep what he saw as the chief issue ever before people's eyes. In a letter to Henry Fawcett, Mill wrote

of: ‘the Slaveholders’ Confederacy. (One should never use any other designation for it than this, the one adopted by the Emancipation Society of Manchester).<sup>20</sup>

And to Mill’s enduring credit, at least in terms of what has been discerned to be the fundamental meaning of history over time, he was right: he did see through to the momentous, central issue and meaning of the war – the abolition or persistence of slavery – when few other leaders of British opinion did. There are, of course, still people today that deny that the war was about slavery, but no one now imagines that the question of tariffs is a crucial one in determining the side with which one should sympathise, yet that was a not inconsiderable view in Britain at the time. Mill could be scathing in his denunciations of Southern sympathisers, yet even in his *Autobiography* – that is, once the unfolding of events had done so much to clarify the question – he was still handling that particular view with respect: ‘There were men of high principle and unquestionable liberality of opinion who thought it a dispute about tariffs.’<sup>21</sup> Mill was aware of the issue of gender-inclusive language, indeed, throughout the war he was trying to get the Reform movement to say ‘universal suffrage’ rather than ‘manhood suffrage’, but this is an occasion when he was not thinking along those lines. Even Harriet Martineau, who was heartily on the side of the North, gave weight to the tariffs issue.

The North was, indeed, irritatingly Protectionist; and the Liberal Party, after all, was the party of free trade. Mill would take the time to discount this view regarding what should be considered a decisive factor in picking a side for Britons, but his main target was those who imagined that the South was fighting a war of liberation, that it was a struggle for Southern freedom. Once again, Liberals had a history of siding with those who fought for their political independence. There were some who saw Jefferson Davis as a kind of Garibaldi figure – and Liberals in Britain, of course, had lauded Garibaldi to the heights. To begin, Mill would point out that each uprising had to be considered on its own merits. He gives as a thought experiment an island that only houses a prison, on which the inmates kill the guards, take over, and declare it to be a sovereign nation. Is there a duty in such a case for Britain to recognise its declaration of independence? As for a more likely scenario, he wondered if the British nation (or even the Liberal Party) was ready to let Ireland secede. Mill’s main point, however, took the argument back to slavery: Whose liberation? Whose freedom? Whose rights? Whose

independence? This war of secession, unlike others that many Liberals had supported, was not a matter of recognising the wishes of the people: ‘Have the slaves been consulted? Has *their* will been counted as any part in the estimate of collective volition?’<sup>22</sup> White Southerners were not fighting for human freedom, but only for the freedom to be oppressors.

To understand Mill and the American Civil War, one needs to understand Mill himself: his strange biography and bifurcated self. He was raised and educated by his father, James Mill, to be a cool, dispassionate, logical thinker. This training was so effective for a time that Mill later reflected that as a teenager he had become ‘a mere reasoning machine’. Specifically, he and his likeminded, Utilitarian friends were foes of ‘sentimentality’ and, indeed, all appeals to ‘feeling’. They were so determined on this point because they were frustrated by how often it was a weapon forged against them: ‘we found all the opinions to which we attached most importance, constantly attacked on the grounds of feeling.’<sup>23</sup> In debate, Mill would dismiss an appeal to feeling as irrelevant to the task of thinking through an issue: ‘the province of feeling commences where that of reason ends.’<sup>24</sup>

At the age of 20, however, Mill had a breakdown, and this resulted in his adopting a less doctrinaire position in which he learned how to balance logic with feeling, Bentham with Coleridge. He burned a manuscript of his which was an attack on sentiment. Nevertheless, although he now understood that there was more to life than logic, he also continued to believe that his own natural aptitude and calling lay in that direction. Hence his fame was first made with a massive, technical work, *A System of Logic* (1843). Throughout his mature years, individuals were continually stunned when they had pigeonholed Mill in their mind as a cool reasoner and then they suddenly discovered that he could also be a heated activist. Indeed, while this is no surprise to anyone who has studied Mill in depth – not least because of Richard Reeves portrait of him as a ‘Victorian firebrand’, a ‘passionate man of action’ – the assumption that Mill was clinically unfeeling still happens regularly to this day.<sup>25</sup>

The American Civil War is when Mill first gained widespread, public attention as a passionate polemicist. His erstwhile Benthamite ally, George Grote, described Mill disapprovingly as ‘violent against the South’.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers made the same observation: ‘According to the *Standard*, Mill’s arguments were not based on his usual rigorous logic but on his “passionate feeling.”’<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the Duke of

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Argyll, who sympathised with the North, was pleasantly surprised to discover that ‘the cold-blooded philosopher comes out with much warmth.’<sup>28</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Mill reported that his ‘strongest feelings were engaged in this struggle’ and, especially given the views of his youth, it is striking how consistently he framed the debate in terms of feelings.<sup>29</sup> He complained that there was so much sympathy for the South because English ‘feeling’ had been subjected to ‘misdirection’.<sup>30</sup> And this was his appeal to Britain in ‘The Contest in America’: ‘now, if ever, is the time to review our position, and consider whether we have been feeling what ought to have been felt.’<sup>31</sup> Cairnes’s book was commended in Mill’s review for containing amply information ‘to give a new turn to English feeling on the subject.’<sup>32</sup> What Mill wanted – and was eventually delighted to see – was a reawakening of the ‘Anti Slavery feeling’ which Britain had had earlier in the century.<sup>33</sup> Mill praised the journalist Edward Dicey for writing about the war ‘with right feeling’.<sup>34</sup>

Mill’s feelings were so aroused because he saw Britain’s attitude toward the war as not a mere matter of policy: it was a moral issue. Moreover, he was determined to make Britons see that it was a moral issue. By their overwhelming sympathy with the South, Britons had been taking the wrong ‘moral attitude’: they had succumbed to the posture of an ‘inbred Toryism’ which ‘has no moral repugnance to the thought of human beings born to the penal servitude for life.’<sup>35</sup> Stefan Collini has convincingly presented Mill as the archetypal ‘public moralist’ of the Victorian age.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson, and John M. Robson have painted a detailed and vivid portrait of Mill as ‘a moralist in and out of Parliament’ who, by the mid-1860s, in his own estimation, was ‘one of the country’s leading political moralists.’<sup>37</sup> Eldon J. Eisenach’s edited volume, *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism*, also has as its theme the exploration of ‘Mill as moralist’.<sup>38</sup> Richard Reeves illuminatingly observed that Mill saw the American Civil War as a kind of ‘moral test’ for Britain.<sup>39</sup> Collini’s image is that Mill saw the war as ‘a thermometer with which to take the moral temperature of English society as a whole.’<sup>40</sup>

As with right feelings, this too became a way that Mill praised people during the war years. Perhaps somewhat awkwardly, he wrote a few words to ‘the editor of the *Spectator*’, praising whomever it was who held that office by saying he held him in very high ‘moral’ estimation.<sup>41</sup> As a scholar, Cairnes might have hoped that Mill would praise him as a formidable

thinker, but Mill’s mind was elsewhere, leading him to admire the political economist’s ‘excellent moral nature’.<sup>42</sup> Much of Mill’s allegedly ‘intemperate’ language about the war arose from his efforts to elicit a moral response from his readers: ‘The South are in rebellion not for simple slavery; they are in rebellion for the right of burning human creatures alive’; ‘It will be desirable to take thought beforehand what are to be our own future relations with a new Power professing the principles of Attila and Genghis Khan as the foundation of its Constitution’; and so on.<sup>43</sup>

The key point was that it was perfectly possible for Britons to think about the American Civil War through some other lens than morality. At one extreme, Mill’s erstwhile friend, Thomas Carlyle, in his bluff, strongman-worshipping, rabidly racist way, refused to acknowledge that even slavery itself was any kind of important or pressing moral issue.<sup>44</sup> If the war was not a moral issue, what kind of issue was it? To turn to fellow Liberals, James Fitzjames Stephen often thought about the conflict as a constitutional issue.<sup>45</sup> Or Britons could think about the war economically, or pragmatically, or in terms of policy, which are perhaps all various aspects of thinking of it in terms of personal or national self-interest. The Northern blockade – especially because of the loss of Southern cotton used in the Lancashire textile industry – was a major blow to the British economy and devastating to many individuals, so there was certainly a strong economic argument to be made that finding a way for the war to be over and to recognise the Confederate States of America was in British’s national interest. In some public remarks on 7 October 1862, W. E. Gladstone claimed that Jefferson Davis and those with him had ‘made a nation’.<sup>46</sup> This caused a sensation because it was widely interpreted as a signal that the government was about to recognise the Confederacy (and, indeed, key cabinet members were assuming at that time that it was more a matter of when than if that would happen). Putting an even heavier hand on the scale, Lord Russell tendentiously asserted in public that the North was fighting a war of domination while the South was fighting for its independence. Mill found that remark particularly exasperating: ‘The moral relations of the two parties are misplaced, are almost reversed, in Earl Russell’s dictum.’<sup>47</sup> At the very least, one can see Gladstone and Russell as taking a pragmatic approach to the question of Britain’s response to the war. Russell, in particular, rather than engaging in a moral discourse, was inclined

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to see matters through the lens of upholding Britain's national honour. Even in the case of the *Alabama*, which Russell knew was an incident in which Britain was at fault, he still was viewing matters through this frame – alarmed, for instance, that the government might allow the issue to be decided by international arbitration, an option which he was certain would be to forfeit Britain's national honour.<sup>48</sup> Again, the point is not to agree that none of these people were raising valid and important issues; the point is to see how Mill was using a strategy of foregrounding morality as a way of undercutting the relevance of other issues to Britons' decision regarding which side in the conflict to support.

While we are naming individuals, it is worth noticing the curious case of William Whewell. In his Manichaean frame of mind, Mill had pegged Whewell as an enemy. Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) provided Mill with the foil he needed to rouse himself to write his *System of Logic*. It is more difficult to draw a straight line from someone's philosophical beliefs to the political ones that supposedly will inevitably flow from them than people often assume. Whewell was, in Mill's terms, an intuitionist, a believer in innate ideas. The philosophical dispute need not detain one here, but the thing to grasp for the purpose at hand is that Mill was so forcefully opposed to intuitionism because he believed that it served as an intellectual prop for aristocratic and other retrograde institutional forms that needed to be removed or reformed in the name of progress. Again, in short, it was, in Mill's view, a philosophical view that served to give aid and support to bad political positions. To Mill's great surprise and delight, however, Whewell was among that rare minority of eminent figures in British life who early on was an emphatic supporter of the Union side. Mill heard the report that Whewell would not even allow *The Times* into his house because of its pro-Southern slant. Here was real feeling! Here was the kind of passionate indignation that the situation should arouse in any right-thinking person.<sup>49</sup> From that moment onward Mill was happy to list Whewell as on the side of the angels.

To return to Gladstone and Russell, however, Mill the moralist was apt to see pure national self-interest as itself an inherently immoral standard. He had made that point already in the year before the war in his 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention'.<sup>50</sup> It was said that Palmerston opposed an international scheme to create a Suez Canal because it was not in Britain's interests; but if it was in humanity's

interests, Mill insisted, then opposing it out of merely national considerations was immoral. As Collini has observed of the Victorian public moralists: 'the partiality involved in privileging the claims of any more restricted group tended to be castigated as another form of selfishness.'<sup>51</sup> The point to keep in view is that Mill was insisting that the question of Britain's reaction to the American conflict needed to be framed in moral terms.

The perspective of social science research today can help us analyse what Mill was doing in his advocacy about the war. As we have already seen, and as researchers have confirmed, people can construe the same issue in moral or non-moral terms. Jay J. Van Bavel, Dominic J. Packer, Ingrid Johnsen Haas, and William A. Cunningham have demonstrated that 'people are able to shift back and forth between moral and non-moral evaluative modes in a highly flexible fashion.'<sup>52</sup> This also means that people can be prompted to reclassify an issue so that they are no longer just thinking about it pragmatically, but now see it as a moral issue. This has been called moral framing or reframing. As Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer have shown, this technique is so powerful that it can effectively realign someone on an issue who had hitherto assumed that their political convictions necessitated them supporting the opposite position:

In the political arena, moral reframing involves arguing in favor of a political position that members of a political group would not normally support in terms of moral concerns that the members strongly ascribe to. Fitting a message to a particular audience in this way is persuasive because it makes the position relevant to and concordant with the audience's deeply held moral convictions. ... This suggests that moral reframing effects can be effective enough to be persuasive, even when seen as coming from a political outgroup.<sup>53</sup>

Moralising an issue also changes how people think and behave in other ways: once they have decided it is a moral issue, they hold to their view with greater tenacity and strength of conviction and in a more extreme form.<sup>54</sup> Finally, moral framing has been shown to result in 'resistance to compromise'.<sup>55</sup>

These are, of course, all outcomes that Mill was hoping for in his advocacy for the Union. The last one – a refusal to compromise – is particularly striking. In his 'Coleridge' essay in 1840, Mill had referred to England as 'the native

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land of compromise', but in the first half of the 1860s he was in no mood for compromise.<sup>56</sup> Mill's great fear throughout the war was that the North would be too soft on the South. He wanted slavery completely eradicated, and he was convinced that this would only happen if the Confederate states were utterly crushed. Yet more, he worried that if the Confederacy was crushed too easily then the situation might drift back into the *status quo ante bellum*. So, most jarring of all, Mill reasoned somewhat cold-bloodedly that Union losses and military setbacks would so harden the hearts of Northerners against the South that the end result would be the destruction of slavery. The more Northern blood that was spilt – without the North losing the will to continue the fight all the way to complete victory – the better. This is a running refrain in Mill's letters throughout the war years. After the Federals were defeated at the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863, for instance, Mill wrote to Henry Fawcett: 'The tidings from America may be considered good. It is a question if Rosecranz's [sic] check is to be regretted, since if the war ends too soon, it may end without the complete emancipation of the slaves.'<sup>57</sup> Even in his *Autobiography*, Mill reflected that he had had hopes of the good that would come out of the war if its 'termination did not come too soon and too easily.'<sup>58</sup>

The news of this bloody, bloody war – which Mill followed closely battle by battle – somehow would not elicit a response of horror or sympathy or compassion from him in regard to the staggeringly high numbers of killed and wounded. Mill was in an uncompromising frame of mind and any news that he thought meant that the North would fight on and not offer peace terms he regarded as good news. He does not tell us, in a Utilitarian calculus, how many deaths would be too many, but as the war was coming to an end he explicitly reaffirmed that he did not see the conflict as close to that limit: 'The present attitude of the Free States with respect to slavery was worth buying at even a greater price than has been paid for it.'<sup>59</sup> (On the Union side alone, that price was well over 360,000 soldiers killed.) The assassination of Abraham Lincoln did evoke human reactions from Mill, but even in the initial shock of that news he could not help but add that the cause 'may even benefit by it'.<sup>60</sup> In this view, every bloody, embittering attack on the North was just one more nail in the coffin of the Old South.

To return briefly to the research of social scientists, Linda J. Skitka, Anthony N. Washburn,

and Timothy S. Carse observe: 'There is also evidence that people are willing to accept violent solutions to conflict when doing so yields morally preferred ends.'<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, very few people are able or willing to keep forever looking exclusively through a moral lens. Mill himself supported Britain's official position of neutrality during the war. In other words, despite his heated rhetoric, he was not calling for Britain to become a co-belligerent with the North. This, of course, was the only practical position imaginable in British politics at the time – one might even have considered it quite a victory that the government was restrained from recognising the Confederacy. Still, as Kinser has astutely observed: 'On the point of neutrality Mill appeared to argue that political expediency supersedes moral necessity, even though such a view contradicts his unambiguous position that nothing in the American conflict is more important than the utter destruction of slavery.'<sup>62</sup> A purist moral position is often too narrow a path to stay upon. Mill often simplified the discussion of the conflict as part of a rhetorical strategy for motivating Britons to side with the North. It is also worth keeping in mind that Mill was not having to weigh specific actions and responses as a member of the government: he could declare what was right in bold, sweeping strokes without having the burden of needing to craft and implement the specifics of policies and to deal with their consequences.

Another striking feature of Mill's advocacy for the cause of the North was that the most powerful way he could find to communicate how momentous were the issues at stake was to reach for language that had a religious charge. Let's begin with his initial, great appeal to the British people, 'The Contest in America'. Before it became clear that the United States would back down, passions were inflamed in England against the Northern states because of the *Trent* affair, and there was a real possibility that Britain might go to war with the Union. Mill wrote after that crisis had passed, but he told his readers that, if the worst had happened, it would have meant that 'at the moment of conflict between the good and the evil spirit – at the dawn of a hope that the demon might now at last be chained and flung into the pit, England stepped in, and, for the sake of cotton, made Satan victorious.'<sup>63</sup> The evil spirit; the demon; Satan. Moreover, while people today often might not be aware of it, Mill's original readers would have heard a specific biblical allusion in this statement to Revelation 20:1–3 where Satan is chained and thrown into a pit.

Mill praised those true Christians who ‘consider a fight against slavery as a fight for God’. He declared that the proper way for the North to respond to their wrongdoing in the *Trent* affair was with ‘confession and atonement’. He argued that the Confederates were determined ‘to do the devil’s work’. He held out the hope that war would become, for Americans, the source of their ‘regeneration’ (a word overwhelmingly used in theological discourse). Finally, Mill insisted: ‘For these reasons I cannot join with those who cry Peace, peace.’<sup>64</sup> Once again, that is a very straightforward statement to understand on its surface without any special background knowledge and it is often quoted in discussions of Mill and the American Civil War, but what is not commented upon – but what his original readers would have well understood – is that Mill was aligning himself with the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>65</sup> It is Jeremiah who stands up as a true prophet to oppose the faithless priests and false prophets who have been deceiving the people about the reality of the situation by saying: ‘Peace, peace; when there is no peace.’ (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11)

And, freethinker though he was, one should not imagine that Mill was just pandering to a religious audience.<sup>66</sup> Even in his private letters when writing to people who needed no convincing, Mill would reach for religious language as the only words that seemed strong enough to give vent to his feelings. For instance, he remarked to Cairnes in February 1863 that ‘the battle against the devil could not be fought on a more advantageous field than that of slavery.’<sup>67</sup> He insisted that, if the Confederacy was triumphant, then the next step must be ‘a general crusade of civilised nations for its suppression’.<sup>68</sup> (Victorians would have heard the word ‘crusade’ as a call for a holy war.) Mill’s feelings about Abraham Lincoln were almost always expressed in this way. He said the president of the United States reminded him of a saying of Solomon: ‘The righteousness of the righteous man guideth his steps’ (Proverbs 11:5; 13:6).<sup>69</sup> Upon the president’s death, Mill observed that Lincoln had received ‘the crown of martyrdom’ (Revelation 2:10).<sup>70</sup> In a letter to his old philosophical foe, William Whewell, Mill praised him for his support for the North by declaring that Whewell had been among those ‘who have been faithful when so many were faithless’.<sup>71</sup> There are numerous more such examples. Even in retrospect in his *Autobiography*, only religious language could bear the weight of how significant Mill considered what had been at stake in the war. Here, too, it is presented as a struggle with

‘the powers of evil’. Slavery is referred to as ‘the accursed thing’. Once again, Victorians would have understood that to be a biblical phrase referring to possessing what you have no right to possess and thereby bringing military defeat upon your own people (Joshua 6:17). In the very same sentence with that scriptural reference in it, Mill refers to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison as the movement’s ‘apostle’ and John Brown as its ‘martyr’.<sup>72</sup> One might object that the notion of a political martyr is a pretty thoroughly secularised concept, but Mill also added in a footnote that Brown reminded him of Thomas More, thus aligning the abolitionist with a martyr and saint of the Church.<sup>73</sup>

Mill was remarkably and admirably right about so much in his response to the American Civil War. Georgios Varouxakis has argued that Gladstone had Mill in mind when he spoke dismissively of ‘negrophilists’ and has made the case that Mill was unusually enlightened on issues of race for his time and place.<sup>74</sup> Mark A. Noll has observed that, in all the debates in white America which hashed out whether or not there was contemporary warrant in biblical and classical examples of slavery, what was blindingly ignored by almost all these white commentators was that *race* slavery was certainly not justified by those examples – and this ‘peculiar institution’ created additional horrors and outrages and contradictions all its own that are heaped on top of the horrors and outrages and contradictions of all forms of slavery.<sup>75</sup> Yet to Mill’s enormous credit he was an extremely rare voice who grasped this point and tried his best to make the public see it:

The first distinction is the vital fact of the difference in colour between modern slaves and their masters. In the ancient world, slaves, once freed, became an integral part of free society; their descendants not only were not a class apart, but were the main source from which the members of the free community were recruited; and no obstacle, legal or moral, existed to their attainment of the highest social positions.<sup>76</sup>

Many commentators have observed that Mill was remarkably prescient on the course of the war. To those who said that even the government of the United States itself insisted that it was only a fight to preserve the Union, Mill countered that as the war went on it would *become* a fight to free the slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation proved Mill to be a prophet in the sense of prediction as well as moral pronouncement. As he wrote in a joyful letter: ‘it

**Many commentators have observed that Mill was remarkably prescient on the course of the war. To those who said that even the government of the United States itself insisted that it was only a fight to preserve the Union, Mill countered that as the war went on it would become a fight to free the slaves.**



## John Stuart Mill, moral outrage and the American Civil War

has come sooner than I myself ventured to predict'.<sup>77</sup> And, at the time that he predicted it in print, most of those who thought of themselves as prescient in England were predicting that the British government would soon recognise the Confederacy and that there would be some kind of treaty that would put an end to the war and recognise the Southern states as an independent nation. Noll has written of how the religious debate was actually settled: 'it was left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.'<sup>78</sup> The same is no less true for the policy debate in Britain: backing the North because it was proving to be the winning side meant there need be no conflict between doing what was morally right as Mill was expounding it and pursuing national self-interest.

Nevertheless, Mill had made a real and substantial difference to the debate by swaying a considerable number of people to the side of the North when its final victory did not at all seem inevitable, perhaps not even likely. Mill's own assessment of the influence of his article, 'The Contest in America', is accurate and just:

Written and published when it was, the paper helped to encourage those Liberals who had felt overborne by the tide of illiberal opinion, and to form in favour of the good cause a nucleus of opinion which increased gradually, and after the success of the North began to seem probable, rapidly.<sup>79</sup>

Duncan Andrew Campbell has observed that even the radical *Westminster Review* was lost in the fog of war and did not know what line to take on the American conflict until Mill showed it the way, after which the journal stuck to it unwaveringly.<sup>80</sup> Just a couple months after the war ended, Mill was elected to parliament, and he saw his work there as a continuation of his calling to be a public moralist. He repeatedly observed that he viewed being admitted to parliament as his

gaining a higher 'pulpit' from which to 'preach'.<sup>81</sup> Gladstone testified that Mill's 'presence in the House of Commons has materially helped to raise and sustain its moral tone,' and observed that a parliamentary speech by Mill was like listening to 'a sermon'.<sup>82</sup> Gladstone has been seen as central to the 'moralising of Liberalism', but studying Liberals and the American Civil War serves as a reminder that John Stuart Mill was there before him and helped to lead the way.<sup>83</sup>

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- 1 The literature on the British response to the American Civil War is vast. See, for instance (to list them in reverse chronological order): Hugh Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018); Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (Random House, 2010); Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Opinion and the American Civil War* (Boydell, 2003); R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (Peter Smith, 1957).
- 2 Eldon J. Eisenach (ed.), *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), p. 3.
- 3 John Stuart Mill, 'The Slave Power', in John M. Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education* (vol. xxi of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*) (Toronto University Press, 1984), pp. 143–64 (here 157). This article was originally published in the October 1862 issue of the *Westminster Review*. Hereafter *CW* and the volume number will be used as a short citation for the *Collected Works*.
- 4 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays* (*CW*, i), ed. J. M. Robson (Liberty Fund, 2006; reprint of University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 266.
- 5 Brent E. Kinser, *The American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy* (Routledge, 2011), p. 7.

- 6 Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation*, p. 19.
- 7 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 801.
- 8 J. S. Mill to J. E. Cairnes, 5 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvii, p. 1003.
- 9 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 10 J. S. Mill to William Rathbone, Jr., 29 Nov. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 904.
- 11 J. S. Mill to James Beal, 7 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1005.
- 12 J. S. Mill to Thomas Payley Potter, 16 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1012.
- 13 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 135.
- 14 George Barnett Smith, *The Life and Speeches of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P.*, ii (2 vols., Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), p. 94.
- 15 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 112.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 17 John Stuart Mill, 'The Contest in America', in Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education* (*CW*, xxi), pp. 124–42 (here 132). (This article was originally published in the Feb. 1862 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*.)
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 19 J. S. Mill to J. E. Cairnes, 8 Nov. 1864: *CW*, xv, p. 966.
- 20 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 17 May 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 860.
- 21 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 267.
- 22 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 138.
- 23 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 113.
- 24 John Stuart Mill, 'Population: Rely to Thirlwall' (1825), in John M. Robson (ed.), *Journals and Debating Speeches* (*CW*, xxvii) (University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 307. (I realise that this statement is not formally incompatible with Mill's later views, but the point is that in the American Civil War he assumed that an appeal to feeling would work for rather than against the cause of the right.)
- 25 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 3; Alan Millar, 'Mill in a Liberal Landscape', in John Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 497–540 (here 513).
- 26 Harriet Grote, *The Personal Life of George Grote* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., John Murray, 1873), p. 264.
- 27 Georgios Varouxakis, "'Negrophilist' Crusader: John Stuart Mill on the

- American Civil War and Reconstruction', *History of European Ideas*, 39/5 (2013), pp. 729–54 (here 736). It is my pleasure to note here that I owe a general debt to this excellent article by Varouxakis.
- 28 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 142.
- 29 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 30 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 797.
- 31 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 129.
- 32 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 145.
- 33 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 34 J. S. Mill to Theodor Gomperz, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 795.
- 35 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 128–9.
- 36 Collini, *Public Moralists*.
- 37 Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, *A Moralist In and Out of Parliament: John Stuart Mill at Westminster, 1865–1868* (University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 5.
- 38 Eisenach (ed.), *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism*, p. 4.
- 39 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 334.
- 40 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 140.
- 41 J. S. Mill to the editor of *The Spectator*, 20 Feb. 1863: *CW*, xxxii, pp. 136–7. (*The Spectator* had joint editors at this time and the form of this letter seems to indicate that Mill did not know who the editor was.)
- 42 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 21 Jul. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 795.
- 43 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 136, 140.
- 44 T. Peter Park, 'John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, and the U.S. Civil War', *The Historian*, 54/1 (Autumn 1991), pp. 93–106 (especially p. 105).
- 45 Thomas E. Schneider, 'J. S. Mill and Fitzjames Stephen on the American Civil War', *History of Political Thought*, 28/2 (Summer 2007), pp. 290–304.
- 46 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, ii (3 vols., Macmillan and Co., 1903), p. 79.
- 47 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 159.
- 48 Spencer Walpole, *The Life of Lord John Russell*, ii (2 vols., Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), pp. 338–67 (especially 359). The *Alabama* was a warship built in England and sold to the Confederacy in defiance of Britain's own stated policy and rules of neutrality. The *Alabama* made significant contributions to the Southern war effort.
- 49 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 50 John Stuart Mill, 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention', in Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, pp. 112–24. (It was originally published in the Dec. 1859 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*.)
- 51 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 65.
- 52 Jay J. Van Bavel, Dominic J. Packer, Ingrid Johnsen Haas, and William A. Cunningham, 'The Importance of Moral Construal: Moral versus Non-Moral Construal Elicits Faster, More Extreme, Universal Evaluations of the Same Actions', *PLOS One*, 7/11 (Nov. 2012), pp. 1–14.
- 53 Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, 'Moral reframing: A technique for effective and persuasive communication across political divides', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41/12 (2015), pp. 1665–81.
- 54 Andrew Luttrell, Richard E. Petty, Pablo Brinol, and Benjamin C. Wagner, 'Making it moral: Merely labelling an attitude as moral increases its strength', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 65 (2016), pp. 82–93; Van Bavel, et al., 'The Importance of Moral Construal'.
- 55 Linda J. Skitka, Anthony N. Washburn, and Timothy S. Carsel, 'The psychological foundations and consequences of moral conviction', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 6 (2015), pp. 41–4; Kristin N. Garrett and Joshua M. Jansa, 'The Bernie Effect: Framing Economic Issues in Moral Terms', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 5–8 April 2018.
- 56 John Stuart Mill, 'Coleridge', in J. M. Robson (ed.), *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (*CW*, x) (Liberty Fund, 2006; reprint of University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 131.
- 57 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 14 Oct. 1863: *CW*, xv, pp. 889–90. (Mill was referring to Federal Major General, William S. Rosecrans.)
- 58 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 59 J. S. Mill to Joseph Henry Allen, 9 Feb. 1865, *CW*, xvi, p. 993.
- 60 J. S. Mill to Edwin Chadwick, 28 Apr. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1039.
- 61 Skitka, et al., 'The psychological foundations and consequences of moral conviction', p. 42.
- 62 Kinzer, *The American Civil*, pp. 145–6.
- 63 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 128. The *Trent* was a British Royal Mail steamer which a Union naval ship forcibly stopped and then took into custody Confederate envoys who were on board.
- 64 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 129–30, 139, 141–2.
- 65 George P. Landow's term for public moralists is 'elegant Jeremiahs' and it is particularly apt for Mill on this occasion: George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Cornwell University Press, 1986).
- 66 For Mill's complicated but surprisingly engaged interaction with religious thought, see Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 67 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 7 Feb. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 801.
- 68 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 25 Nov. 1861: *CW*, xv, p. 752.
- 69 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 26 Dec. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 912.
- 70 J. S. Mill to Parke Godwin, 15 May 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1051.
- 71 J. S. Mill to William Whewell, 24 May 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1056.
- 72 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 73 Thomas More was still a few decades away from formal canonisation but, of course, that act is a recognition that a person has already been widely considered saintly.
- 74 Varouxakis, "'Negrophilist' Crusader'.
- 75 Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- 76 Mill, 'The Slave Power', pp. 152.
- 77 J. S. Mill to Thomas Hare, 9 Oct. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 800.
- 78 Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, p. 50.
- 79 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 268.
- 80 Campbell, *English Opinion*, p. 213.
- 81 See, for instance, J. S. Mill to William George Ward [n.d., 1865]; J. S. Mill to George Grote, 25 Dec. 1866: *CW*, xvi, pp. 1165, 1234.
- 82 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 169; Kinzer, et al., *A Moralist In and Out of Parliament*, p. 7.
- 83 Schneider, 'J. S. Mill and Fitzjames Stephen on the American Civil War', p. 290.