

King cotton dethroned essay example

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



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Former Governor John Hammond of South Carolina gave an impassioned speech retroactively styled “ Cotton is King” at a pro-slavery event on Kansas in 1857. In this speech, he makes a number of points, few of which are sustainable based on evidence. He argued that the nation would be insane to go to war against the states responsible for the production of cotton (Hammond, 302) when it is the most stable commodity the US has to offer the world. (Hammond, 302) He basically argues that it would be economic suicide for the United States to turn against the production of cotton by prohibiting the use of slaves in its production. (Hammond, 302) Hammond also claims that the entire South is industrially and materialistically ready to fight a war, and that such a war would be one that they would win. (Hammond, 303) He then turns to some of the older “ tried and true” defenses of Slavery. He argues that slaves are better treated than the free poor of Europe. (Hammond, 304) He also states that as a race, African-Americans are too ‘ Intellectually weak” to cause political trouble. (Hammond, 304) He argues that the gift of the slave race to the South was granted by God, and so not to utilize it in His name would be sinful. (Hammond 305) Finally, he argues that being slaves “ elevates” African-Americans from the condition they would be in if left alone. (Hammond, 306) Each of these arguments, by the time the speech was made, was manifestly untrue, and in some cases outright lies.

Hammond argued that the Slaves were treated better than the free poor of Europe. (Hammond, 304) This is demonstrably false. The average age of death in Europe in the 1850s was about 45 years, whereas in slave

populations it was in the mid-thirties. (Zinn, 168) Additionally, while labor conditions in Europe were far from ideal, laborers had some rights. They eventually organized politically into unions to bargain for better working conditions. Slaves, who were forbidden even the most fundamental rights, such as the right to learn to read and write, were left with no alternative but armed revolt to improve their condition. (Zinn, 169) Major slave rebellion attempts occurred in New Orleans in 1811 (Zinn, 169), Charleston, in 1822 (Zinn, 169) and 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia (Zinn, 170). During the same period in Europe, there were several rebellions, but most of them led to the formation of new Governments. Slave rebellions universally ended with the murder of those involved, and a strengthening of laws subjugating African Americans in the locations of rebellion. (Zinn, 170) The only other option for slaves unhappy with their lot in life was escape to the free North. By the 1850s, over 1000 slaves escaped into the North (Zinn, 171). They were perused and punished severely if caught. The masters of the south used hunting dogs to track fugitive slaves. The dogs would bite, main, and even kill their quarry if not stopped. (Zinn, 171) Other than rebellion and escape attempts, African-American slaves had little recourse to improve their situation. One other method they used was a slowdown of work. (Zinn 172) Free whites who did not own slaves often encouraged the slaves to act out against their masters, sometimes supplying weapons or helping with their escape. (Zinn, 172)

Then urban poor in Europe generally fared better than the slave in the US south. Even though the poor in cities faced the prospect of starvation and homelessness, as well as an uncertainty about their future, they had a

number of key advantages over slaves in the South US. (Stillwagon, 14) One such advantage was that society recognized poverty as a problem, and worked to better the situations.(Stillwagon, 28) Governments and private charities ran orphanages, workhouses and shelters for the poor. (Stillwagon, 32) Also, a person who was not doing well in Urban Europe had the option of attempting to come to the Colonies and settle these newer lands.(Stillwagon, 45) The Europeans were not systematically prohibited from obtaining education, or from travelling where they might. (Stillwagon, 58)

Hammond's contention that African Americans are racially inferior with respect to intelligence is ridiculous. When controlling for educational and socio-economic differences it has been found that African-Americans are no less intelligent than whites. Individual examples from the time period are numerous and persuasive. Fredrick Douglass is one example of a former slave becoming an academically acclaimed writer and speaker. (Zinn, 168) Harriet Tubman is another. She guided over 300 fugitive slaves to freedom through the " Underground Railroad". This required her to pass undetected into southern territory nearly 20 times. (Zinn, 172) A Feat she accomplished with little difficulty. (Zinn 173) The idea that the family was not valued in African American culture has also proven to be untrue. Although nothing in Southern law prevented masters from separating families of slaves from each other, the slaves themselves never gave up on the family as an institution. (Zinn, 173) Despite its illegality in many places, slaves still got married in large numbers (Zinn 174) The marriages were very stable and numerous documents exist supporting the notion that despite separation from each other, slave families attempted to maintain contact and as much

intimacy as their circumstances permitted. (Zinn, 174) The intelligence of the African Americans is further evinced by their efforts in the North to free their brethren in the South. One free Black man named David Walker wrote a pamphlet against slavery that was so effective that the slave state of Georgia offered \$10, 000 to anyone who could capture Mr. Walker and \$1000 to anyone who killed him. (Zinn, 175) Unfortunately, but typically, Mr. Walker was killed in 1830. (Zinn, 176)

Hammond's contention that African Americans were "elevated" by their status of slaves is based on precious logic. The argument is predicated upon the notion that African-Americans would even be in the United States without slavery. (Phillips, 134) With very few exceptions, this would not have been the case. Left to their own devices in their native lands, African Americans would inarguably be in better circumstance than slaves in the American South. (Phillips, 136) They would be independent and free members of their own nations. It was the voyage to the New World, undertaken under duress, that caused the Africans to be "lowered" to the state that Hammond imagines that they would be in. (Phillips, 138) Hammond's contention that slavery is God's will is based on a very selective reading of scripture. The punishment of the "Sons of Ham" in the old testament, used often by the religious people to justify the mistreatment of African American slaves is flawed in that it ignores people of color living in other parts of the world, many of whom are not manual laborers as suggested by scripture. (Phillips, 144) Hammond himself relies on the words of Jesus who stated "there will be poor always" (Hammond, 206) as religious justification for slavery. (Phillips, 116) This makes little sense when one considers that the slaves of

the confederacy were not the only poor people, and that Jesus was making an observation, not recommending a course of action. (Phillips 118) Nowhere does scripture describe Jesus as advocating slavery. (Phillips 120) That he did not condemn it outright speaks more to the conditions of slavery in ancient Rome. (Phillips, 121) In that time and place, slaves as a whole were treated much better than in the American South. They earned a wage, and could eventually purchase or be granted their freedom. (Phillips 121) No stigma attached the former slave, who could do any job and take advantage of every right in Roman society that any other citizen could enjoy. (Phillips 121) African slavery had already been disavowed by the nations of Europe. In fact, when a group of slaves in 1841 took over a slave ship and sailed it to the British West Indies, the British refused to return the slaves to the United State. (Zinn, 177) The people of Britain had already decided against the institution of slavery.(Zinn, 177)

Hammond also overestimated the South's readiness to fight the Civil War. Despite employing a captive labor force, and fighting a defensive war on home territory, the South eventually succumbed to its disadvantages. (Zinn, 176) The Union badly outnumbered the South both in manpower, where they had 22 million compared to the Confederate 5 million (discounting 4 million slaves) and in the number of state, 23 to 11. (Zinn, 176) This gave the Union a 4-to-1 edge in manpower. The Northern Union also enjoyed a vast advantage over the South in manufacturing. (Zinn, 176) At the time of the Civil War, the Confederates produced only 7% of the manufacturing in the nation, and had only one iron foundry of any size, Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond. (Zinn, 176) The Union states produced 96% of the railroad

equipment and 97% of the guns. (Zinn, 176) Despite popular belief, even in the area of farming, the North held an advantage. (Zinn, 177) The northern farm economy was geared toward producing wheat, whereas the south was geared for cotton. (Zinn, 177) Since southern transport was disrupted by the war, food shortages occurred in many places. (Zinn, 177) Meanwhile, shortages in Europe allowed wheat the North to take over dominance of exports as “ King Wheat” began to topple “ King Cotton.” (Leibergott, 866) As the war raged on, the Union advantage in transportation became more pronounced. (Zinn, 178) The South had only one East-West rail connection, the Chattanooga to Memphis line. (Zinn, 180) Despite these advantages, the South did manage to win some victories and extend the war to four years in length. (Zinn 173) They had, at the outset, better commanders, as the South contained The Citadel and VMI, two prominent military schools, while the North only had West Point, which trained Southern Commanders as well. (Zinn, 174) Hammond was also correct in implying that the people of the South had a strong Military tradition. The South participated heavily in several Indian Wars, and constantly feared a massive slave uprising.(Zinn, 174) Among the Southern military men who fought the war on behalf of the Confederacy included PGT Beauregard, “ Stonewall” Jackson, and Robert E. Lee. (Zinn 182) Ultimately, though, the North advantages grinded down the southern efforts into an inevitable defeat. Further, it was not demonstrated in any instance that the quality of soldier was superior in the South as compared to the North.(Zinn, 174)

Hammond’s contention that it would be “ insanity” for the United States to attack slavery because it was integral to the production of cotton is also

incorrect. Manufacturing was becoming more and more central to the Northern Economy, and new Western territories were not growing cotton owing to the weather and climate conditions in those places. Thus the institution of slavery, limited as it was to plantation life, would only be popular and accepted in places where the practitioners were in political power. The political growth of new states that did not condone slavery for that reason was one of the underlying causes of the civil war. This is illustrated most starkly by Hammond's speech, which is given in Kansas, a territory where slavery would never flourish on a massive scale. (Hammond, 201) In fact, after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, the production of cotton continued apace, with many of the newly freed slaves working as sharecroppers. (Aiken, 43) Sadly, the world market for American Cotton had vanished during the war years. European consumers, unable to get raw cotton for the blockaded South, turned to other sources. (Aiken 45) The Southern reliance upon using cotton as leverage to bring Europe into the War on their side failed to produce the desired results.(Aiken 45) With the Union blockading 95% of cotton exports and the South holding the remaining amounts hostage against European war aid, industry simply sought their cotton elsewhere. (Aiken, 48) The cotton economy of the South never recovered from this and it was eventually forced to diversify its economic activity in order to survive. (Aiken, 52)

Hammond, in his speech, roundly overestimated the importance of Southern Cotton on the world economy. (Lebergott, 867) The South had a long-term plan to control the world's economy via its production of cotton. (Lebergott, 868) Thus, the southern landowners devoted all of their resources: slaves,

land and money into the production of cotton at the expense of things such as food, which became a primary hindrance when the war began. By withholding cotton from the world economy, the South forced the businesses of the world to find alternatives to its use. (Lebergott, 870). The world responded, leaving the south holding the means of production on a great deal of cotton that no one wanted to buy. (Lebergott, 871) Additionally, the world didn't have to suffer without Southern cotton for very long. By 1862, northern armies moved into Southern cotton country and seized virtually all the cotton the South had stored. They shipped it to the North for manufacturing and sold some to Europe. (Lebergott, 874) As far as the rest of the world was concerned, cotton would become easier to come by with nations such as India and Egypt increasing their exports 700% over the years of the Civil War. (Lebergott, 869)

In sum, Hammond's "Cotton is King" speech codifies nearly every error, mistake is judgment and wrong reasoning that the South carried into the Civil War. His estimation of the intellectual state of African American slaves was flat out wrong. His contention that slaves had a better life than the free people of Europe is thoroughly refuted by evidence. His estimation of the military readiness in the South may have been accurate in the short term, but the South was ill-prepared for the long war that lay before it. Finally Hammond grossly overestimated the importance of "King Cotton" the world economy. The South counted on their control of large amounts of cotton to persuade Europe to support them against the Union. They had both overestimated the power behind the cotton and underestimated the European antipathy toward the institution of slavery.

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