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Expanding the Sacred Circle: Linton Stephens, Leadership, Loneliness, and the Defense of Slavery in the Old South

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Abstract

Aim: This study examines how Linton Stephens' loneliness, political leadership, and defense of slavery mirrored other public intellectuals in the antebellum South.

Methods: The study draws on primary and secondary sources, including Drew Gilpin Faust's take on intellectual history in the Old South to shine more light on Stephens.

Results: Like other intellectuals in the antebellum South, including the "Sacred Circle" described by Faust, Stephens faced loneliness in his personal life and political isolation while still championing race-based slavery.

Conclusion: Stephens' life mirrored many of the same aspects and experiences that Faust found in the intellectuals and public figures she studied.

Recommendations: Since Stephens reflected the same tendencies that Faust's "Sacred Circle" displayed, intellectual historians studying the Old South should examine the childhoods and loneliness of key figures to mine more insights on their leadership and defense of slavery.

Keywords: Linton Stephens, leadership, Alexander Stephens, proslavery, Old South

Introduction

A year after the Civil War ended and seven months after his brother was released from imprisonment in Fort Warren for serving as the vice president of the Confederacy, Linton Stephens, one of the premier lawyers in Georgia, thought back on the first friend he ever made. But even as he reflected on his first friendships,

Stephens stressed his isolation and alienation from the rest of society.

Despite a host of childhood tragedies, in his youth, Stephens insisted, "the world seemed very bright and beautiful to me—abounding almost in enchantments." At first glance, the young boy

had very little reason to hold such an opinion. In 1826, two months before he turned three, Stephens lost both his parents. Sent to his grandmother's and aunt's house, Linton was separated from his four older siblings, including his half-brother Alexander Hamilton Stephens. Isolated from his siblings, the boy lived a very solitary life, something Stephens reflected on almost four decades later. "My childhood was without companionship, and was felt to be so then," Stephens wrote. "I had my childish griefs and pains, but there was nobody to whom I could say 'I suffer;' nobody to whom I could say 'I have suffered.'" However, there "was one short and bright companionship which crossed my path in those days" when he was six (Waddell, 1877, 9–10).

For an entire week, a "little girl named Cornelia Hays" stayed with Stephens, his grandmother, and his aunt. "How she happened to come there I do not recollect; nor can I even now give a rational conjecture on the subject; for I was the only child on the place, and I can hardly suppose that a little girl came as a playmate for a little boy," Stephens wrote. "However that may have been, she was a playmate; and I thought a glorious one." Four decades after his time with Cornelia, Stephens fondly remembered the joys of that week, including sliding down hills and climbing trees together. Looking back on those days, Stephens stressed it was the first time he ever had a friend. "That little witch got all of my thoughts out of me in that one week," he recalled. "It was so delightful, so charming, to tell her everything." However, as was customary with him, Stephens ended his recollection on a melancholy note. "I do not know what has become of Cornelia Hays in the long and terrible years which have succeeded that one bright week," Stephens wrote. "I have often wondered whether she lives, and remembers that week as I do. I scarcely think so, however, for such companionship was an every-day thing to her; while to me it was an oasis in a great desert" (Waddell, 1877, 10).

Stephens was not the only intellectual and public figure in the antebellum South who grappled with solitude and loneliness, leading to a strong sense of alienation. In her study on a circle of intellectuals in the Old South, Drew Gilpin Faust (1977) found some of the most prominent thinkers in the region—James Henry Hammond, George Holmes, Edmund Ruffin, William Gilmore Simms, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker—possessed a similar sense of alienation. Like the "sacred circle" of intellectuals Faust focused on, Linton Stephens called for a more moral society which, for them, included defending the South's peculiar institution of slavery. "For these Southerners, the most important reform effort was the defense of slavery," Faust wrote. "They identified their values with the South's distinctive way of life by defining moral stewardship as the ultimate basis for the system of human bondage." Defending slavery in spite of his continued alienation from the society he lived in, Stephens mirrored the thoughts and actions of the "sacred circle," showing how Faust's findings extend beyond the intellectuals she focused on (Faust, 1977, x–xi).

Examining Linton Stephens and other antebellum Southern figures offers insights on loneliness and leadership. In recent years, especially after the COVID pandemic, more scholarly attention has focused on loneliness. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the U.S. Surgeon General (Murthy, 2023) released an advisory which cited research showing almost half of American adults grappled with loneliness as technology and other factors weaken social connections. With loneliness on the rise, scholarly attention has turned to how leaders grapple with it in the workplace (Lewis, 2023). While changes in technology and the pandemic have seen

increasing numbers of Americans battling loneliness, the example of Stephens and other antebellum Southerners shows this is not a new phenomenon.

Literature Review

Faust's (1977) book helped spark a resurgence of interest in the Old South's intellectual history. Two decades ago, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese (2004) and Michael O'Brien (2002) offered sweeping surveys of the antebellum South's intellectual history and the views of the slaveholding class, including the importance of socialization and conversation. In the past half century, several biographies have examined the loneliness of antebellum Southern thinkers and politicians, including Faust's (1982) look at James Henry Hammond and Allmendinger's (1990) take on Edmund Ruffin.

While there have been many studies of the Old South and its leading figures, Linton Stephens has been the subject of only a single biography published shortly after his death in 1872. Waddell (1877) offered an adulatory look at Stephens and included excellent selections from his speeches and public and private correspondence. While he is understandably overshadowed by his brother, Linton Stephens deserves more attention from scholars.

Thanks to his political prominence, Alexander Stephens has garnered more attention than his younger brother Linton. Schott's (1988) biography of Alexander Stephens holds up incredibly well after almost four decades. Davis (2001) examined Alexander Stephens' political partnership and friendship with fellow Georgian Robert Toombs. More recently, Hebert (2021) examined the legacy and impact of Alexander Stephens' 1861 speech in which he declared slavery to be "the cornerstone" of the Confederacy. Much like Waddell's book on Linton Stephens, Johnston's and Browne's (1878) biography of the Confederacy's only vice president remains useful due to the primary sources it offers, including his correspondence with his younger brother. The diary Alexander Stephens kept while imprisoned after the Civil War (Avery, 1910) remains essential to understanding the man and his relationship with Linton. In his study of Civil War literature, Edmund Wilson (1962) offered a memorable take on that diary and the close ties of the Stephens brothers. Howe (1979) placed Alexander Stephens' often erratic political career in the Whig tradition in his study of that party's political culture, and many of his findings can be applied to Linton Stephens.

In recent years, scholars and experts have offered several studies and many insights on loneliness and how it impacts leaders. Zumaeta (2018) found corporate executives often face loneliness due to the pressures and responsibilities they face, much like political leaders such as the Stephens brothers encountered. Lewis (2023) noted newer leaders—which could include outsiders like the Stephens brothers—suffer from loneliness due to ill-defined social boundaries, distancing from colleagues, and having fewer peers, all of which would come into play in a traditional agrarian society relying on race-based slavery. While finding gaps in the current research, Lam et al. (2024) insisted "leader loneliness has high relevance to important themes in management research, such as leader-follower relationships, emotions, and well-being in organizations" and called for more research. Gilchrist and Schrage (2025) echoed those themes, noting that loneliness was "destructive" for leaders.

An Orphaned Son of Georgia

Linton Stephens had more reason than most to feel alone and isolated from society. Before Stephens turned three, in 1826, his parents died a week apart. The various Stephens siblings were passed off to various family members with Linton under the care of his maternal grandmother (Waddell, 1877). While they had not been close during the following decade, in 1836, Alexander Stephens, then a rising state legislator in his mid-20s, became Linton's guardian and oversaw his education, including attending Franklin College, studying law under Robert Toombs, and attending law classes at the University of Virginia and Harvard. "For a time their relationship was like that between a father and son," noted Schott. "This eventually gave way to an extraordinary close fraternal attachment marked by mutual respect and deference" (Schott, 1988, 43).

But even with his unusually close ties to his brother, Linton Stephens confronted loneliness and despair as he moved into his mid-30s and continued to climb the political ladder and make a mark at the bar. At the end of 1857, the year his wife Emmeline passed away, Linton wrote Alexander about his "*vis inertiae*," his apathy and inactivity, insisting it was a "prevailing law of nature, controlling matter and mind," and relating how it impacted him. "I can continue, when tired, more easily than I can commence, when dull or indisposed. Resistance to change seems to be stamped upon all things, animate and inanimate; and yet, alas! the great tide of change sweeps all things, good and bad, beautiful and loathsome, lovely and horrible, along its own ceaseless and resistless course," Linton insisted. "All things instinctively oppose it; yet all things are inevitably its victims." The Georgia lawyer painted the world in stark terms. "The universe is but a vast mass of contending elements in travail. What wonder, then, that the births should be woe! woe! woe! or, it is true that light was indeed stricken out of the darkness of chaos?" Linton asked. "When does it shine but to make visible the torture and misery which before lay unseen and unfelt in the repose of dark nonentity? Who is the great Intelligence, or what the unknowing Cause that ever, *eternally* drives the crushing and relentless wheels of Necessity?" (Waddell, 1877, 104).

Not surprisingly, Alexander possessed a similar mindset, which often undermined his political effectiveness (Freehling, 2007). The elder Stephens brother's loneliness and dependency on his brother for companionship came through clearly in a letter he sent Linton after they parted in March 1857, two months after Emmeline died. "Long did I watch the carriage to-day as it slowly bore you away," Alexander wrote his younger brother. "I thought of the muddy roads and chill air you had to encounter, and then the sad scenes you would meet at your journey's end." Alex offered up a "fervent prayer that you might be sustained by that Power above, that rules and shapes our destinies, and that with resignation and fortitude you would bear up against whatever sorrows or griefs may ever betide you." Even after Linton's carriage was out of sight, his brother kept thinking about him. "My mind is with you," the older Stephens brother wrote. "You, above anything else or anybody else, are the object of my solicitude, anxiety and love. I feel for you in your grief—I mourn with you in your sorrow—I weep with you in your distress. I would fain soothe your pangs if I could; but, after all, human consolation can avail nothing" (Waddell, 1877, 99).

Alexander urged his brother to turn to God in the aftermath of his wife's death. "Look to a Power higher and abler," Alexander

advised. "But do not despair—do not let your strength fail you. Bear with fortitude and resignation whatever afflictions may befall you. Don't indulge in despondent feelings; rise early—take bodily exercise; devote your mind to some engaging subject; don't be much alone, don't brood over the subject of your grief; above all, don't let your mind be absorbed in thought after you retire at night; seek repose and sleep. Exercise will conduce to this. Be as cheerful as you can; cultivate the feeling; read such books and seek such company as will conduce to it. Be master of your passions, appetites and weaknesses, whatever they may be, and may God bless and sustain you, now and forever" (Waddell, 1877, 99). But while he may have offered that kind of advice to his brother, Alexander Stephens rarely followed his own recommendations, including sulking in his tent at the end of 1860 when, as one of the leading opponents of secession, he could have played more of a role in preventing it (Freehling, 2007).

Alexander Stephens offered his brother a glimpse into his troubled mind in a revealing letter in 1851. "Thought often settles upon me like a nightmare," he admitted to Linton. "Sometimes I have thought that of all men I was the most miserable; that I was especially doomed to misfortune, to melancholy, to grief" (Johnston and Browne, 1878, 262). Alexander's emaciated appearance—despite being average height, he usually weighed around 80 pounds for most of his life and never grew over 100 pounds—and his poor health only reinforced his melancholy (Davis, 2001). Sharing "the secret of my life" with Linton, Alexander wrote he tried "to rise superior to the neglect or contumely of the mean of mankind, by doing them good instead of harm." Alexander called this "*revenge reversed*," even as he found the world populated "with knaves and fools." Even as he preached on doing good, the elder Stephens brother's isolation from the world—which he shared with Linton—was clearly on display (Johnston and Browne, 1878, 262-263).

Like his brother and the intellectuals Faust (1977) studied, Linton Stephens felt alone and wrestled with solitude and dark thoughts, something he freely shared with his brother. "Saving a very few objects of affection, life has little that can add to, or take from, the small sum of happiness now left to me," Linton wrote Alexander in 1858. "I have a great propensity to talk, or to write of my griefs and my sufferings; but I cannot help feeling that the ear of the warmest friend is growing dull, and constantly more dull, to the oft-repeated story." The younger Stephens recognized how this attitude added to his solitude. "No man has a right to make himself disagreeable; and human nature will not pardon disagreeableness long," he wrote his brother. "The man who inflicts his griefs and complaints upon his friends must soon lose his friends." Despite that, Stephens conceded, "it is hard to speak otherwise than out of the abundance of the heart," even if it meant "I have but little to say." Stephens could only write his brother on the matter and had no one else to confide in. "Silence and solitude are my most constant and congenial companions," Linton Stephens confessed (Waddell, 1877, 113).

Even on reaching his 35th birthday, "the half-way house in the road allotted to life," Linton could not resist adding a melancholy note. "Many break down long before they reach the goal, and very many before they attain the half-way house," he noted in a letter to his brother. "How much longer I shall endure on the route, I cannot know" (Waddell, 1877, 119). Even worse, while he did not suffer from the myriads of health issues that Alexander faced, Linton found restful sleep next to impossible and often kept his children

up. "Oh, the miserable, wakeful hours I have spent in trying to drop the burden of the day, and get rid of thought in the blessed oblivion of sleep! And then, when nature can maintain the struggle no longer, and at last takes refuge in slumber, how brief the respite often is!" he wrote his brother at the end of 1858. "Dreams come, and sometimes take up and carry on the weary thoughts of the day, or introduce strange vagaries of their own, which are often not less tormenting... Life is a weary, weary thing to me!" (Waddell, 1877, 125–126).

The passing of his wife also continued to weigh on Linton's mind. After a mutual friend lost his wife, Linton wrote his older brother about how the pains of Emmeline's death lingered 14 months after her passing. "My own greatest sense of bereavement has been in the loss of that *one single being* on whom I leaned in every trouble," he wrote Alexander. "It has often seemed to me that I could bear any other affliction as heavy as the loss of her, (if it were possible for any other to be as heavy) if I could only have *her* help me bear it. But she being gone, all is desolation! There is no comfort, and nothing but despair." Despite his close relationship with his brother, Linton confessed he had been dependent on Emmeline. "It is a great calamity to be dependent on any one being, as I was upon my wife. I was aware of it to a great extent while she was in life; but I had not comprehended it all," he admitted. "I had often trembled at the prospect of our separation; but still had cherished a hope, which was a blessed and blissful one, that we should glide gently along through many happy years, and then sink to rest together. Often, often, did we express to each other the fervent aspiration that we might not be separated in our deaths" (Waddell, 1877, 114).

Linton would think of his late wife at random moments and his emotions would consume him. "Oh God! it seems to me I am crazy!" he admitted to Alexander. "So keen and so sudden does the sense of my loss strike me at many times, as to deprive me of all sense, and transport me in a twinkling into a world of confusion and doubt. I often doubt whether I exist." As he continued to write on the matter, he realized he could not express his feelings, even to his brother. "It is so curious, because it is so sudden and confounding. I am so overwhelmed by a sudden sense of what I miss, that I cannot realize that I am alive. This is a feeling that is very frequent with me. I never had anything like it before, and my description of it is but weak. I doubt whether you can imagine what it is" (Waddell, 1877, 114). Eight months later, Linton Stephens overwhelmingly felt that he and his brother would never see each other again. "I knew you were sad, and I forebore to say one word to make you more so," he wrote Alexander. "If I had given way at all, the dam would have burst and the flood swept through" (Waddell, 1877, 123).

A Lonely Leader on the Public Stage

No surprise given his temperament and personality that Linton Stephens failed to match the political success his older brother achieved. While he served on and off in the legislature, Linton Stephens came up short in his efforts to win a congressional seat even as Alexander grew increasingly prominent on Capitol Hill. "Like his brother, Linton had compelling talents in the courtroom, and he far surpassed him in legal knowledge," noted Schott (1988, 153–154). "But, if anything, Linton was even more independent than Aleck and ill-suited to the chummy camaraderie of politics." Schott wrote that Linton's "rigid convictions" hurt him on the stump while insisting "compromise was foreign to his nature" (Schott, 1988, 154).

Just like the Southern intellectuals and public figures who made up Faust's (1977) "Sacred Circle," Linton Stephens largely stayed away from conventional political parties and alliances. His brother did much the same thing, moving from the Whigs to the Democrats and often refusing to back his party's presidential nominees (Howe, 1979). While Alexander Stephens usually benefited from his close ties to the far more popular Robert Toombs (Davis, 2001), the younger Stephens brother was not so fortunate. That was on clear display during the Civil War when Linton Stephens served in the legislature. With Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's army marching through Georgia in 1864, Stephens, then serving in the state Assembly, insisted he was not allied either with the presidents of the United States or the Confederacy or his friend the governor of Georgia. "*I want no master!*" Stephens declared. "I am the political friend of no man, *of no man*...be he Abe Lincoln, or Jeff. Davis, or Joe Brown, or anybody else." Stephens compared political patronage and bosses to masters enslaving people in chains. "I will never hold out my hands to take on the accursed manacles" (Waddell, 1877, 218). Despite his complaints about patronage, Linton had no problem recommending army promotions to his brother.

With little success on the campaign trail and even less use for conventional political alliances, Linton Stephens achieved more at the bar. Pope Barrow, who, like Linton Stephens, did better in the courtroom than the campaign trail, offered his take on the prominent attorney. "Younger than most of the lawyers with whom he came in actual contact in his circuit, he was trained, from the beginning, to put forth his best energies and tax his great powers to the uttermost," Barrow recalled about Stephens. "Like a young gladiator just alighted in the arena, he had to measure swords with veterans whose sinews were toughened by a hundred conflicts. The name he has built for himself in that circuit best attests how, in all those years of arduous practice, his demeanor as a man, and his success as a lawyer, have endeared him to the hearts of the people, and elevated him to the highest rank of the profession." Barrow painted Linton Stephens as a top attorney who always charted a unique course in the courtroom. "In his manner and his methods of conducting an important case, it was easy to see that he was no imitator," Barrow noted. "He reminded you of nobody else. His success was very great." Barrow also applauded Stephens' ability to appeal to juries (Waddell, 1877, 312). When he was named to the Georgia Supreme Court by Gov. Joseph Brown in 1859, at the age of 35, Linton Stephens was, at the time, the youngest selection to ever serve on that court.

While Stephens might not have found much success on the campaign trail, he stood squarely in the mainstream when it came to championing the South's peculiar institution of human bondage. Like Faust's "sacred circle" of intellectuals, Linton Stephens defended slavery even if he opposed secession. Writing to Alexander in 1855, Linton offered what he called a "*philanthropic view*" on the peculiar institution. "The office performed by the African—menial services and manual labor—is one which, on *universal confession* must be performed in every country by somebody now, in the view of the *philanthropist* who looks to the interest of mankind, is there any difference between confining these offices to a class of men defined by blood, or diffusing them through a class marked by poverty?" Linton asked his brother. "The same amount of that kind of labor is necessary to be performed for a given community, and is it any misfortune that it should all (even) be performed by the black man, unless there be some superiority of the black man over the white? But, on the

contrary, are there not several strong reasons for throwing it upon the black man rather than the white?" (Waddell, 1877, 94). Stephens' questions and defense of slavery fell well into the Southern intellectual mainstream.

Linton pointed to the "great line of demarkation arising out of color" and cited the "known superior docility of the black race." Insisting slavery was "a humane institution," Linton informed his brother that he was thinking of writing an essay on his thoughts. "This idea of mine, when fully comprehended, reduces the whole discussion to two simple considerations—the effect of slavery upon the master in regard to physical, moral, and intellectual development and progress, and its effect upon the slave, or upon that class, which answers to the condition and offices of the slave, in the same particulars," Linton wrote, urging his brother to make similar arguments on the House floor (Waddell, 1877, 94–95).

A week later, Linton followed up in another letter to his brother. In this second letter, Linton attempted to clarify his previous one, insisting that "my idea was, that, as a question of *humanity*, it is obviously indifferent whether the services performed for us by slaves be performed by white men, or black men, so far as the good of the greatest number is concerned; the only question is, the nature of the service, and the necessary number engaged in it." Echoing James Henry Hammond, Linton Stephens insisted that society rested on a lower class of individuals. "What is done by our negroes must be done by somebody, and the only real question, therefore, in point of humanity, is, whether anybody else could perform the same service and be in a *better* condition," he insisted. "If not, the tears of humanity are shed in vain over the woes of the negro, and ought to be shed over the imperfections of nature, which require men to perform such services." Continuing on that theme, the Georgian took aim at critics of slavery. "The abolitionist would simply *substitute* the white man in place of the black. He would not make the bed easier, but only give it a different *occupant*; and *humanity* is concerned only at what befalls man as such, and not for the fate of one particular man, or class of men, rather than another, when the fate is inevitable to some man, or some class" (Waddell, 1877, 95–96).

In making that argument, Linton Stephens anticipated the "mud-sill theory" Hammond, one of the leading intellectuals on the Old South's political stage, would present on the Senate floor three years later. "In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life," Hammond (1866, 318) claimed on the Senate floor. Hammond insisted this lower class needed a "low order of intellect and but little skill" along with "vigor, docility, fidelity." He maintained that this type of lower class was needed "or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement." Comparing this lower class to the foundation of a house, Hammond offered an infamous phrase as he insisted it "constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government; and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one or the other, except on this mud-sill." The South "found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand" since enslaved Blacks were "inferior to her own, but eminently qualified in temper, in vigor, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves." Hammond doubled down on his argument, insisting enslaving Blacks was the natural order. "The highest proof of what is nature's law," Hammond continued. "We are old-fashioned at the South yet; slave is a word discarded now by 'ears polite;' I will not characterize that class at the North by

that term; but you have it; it is there; it is everywhere; it is eternal" (Hammond, 1866, 318). While Stephens made his observations in a letter to his brother, Hammond knew his speech on the subject would garner national attention. "Hammond intended his speech both as a warning to the North and as a rallying cry to the South," Faust (1982) wrote about the speech.

Of course, the man who possessed the greatest influence on Linton Stephens also defended slavery. While Alexander Stephens opposed Georgia leaving the Union and switched parties in the chaotic political battles of the 1850s, as Hebert (2021) found, "his rhetoric on questions concerning race in America remained consistent." Alexander Stephens "believed that slavery was both divinely sanctioned and necessary for the protection and advancement of an inferior black race." Like "most southern white men," the Stephens brothers shared the "common belief...that slavery and southern civilization were inseparable" (Hebert, 2021, 37). In his new role as vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens would infamously declare slavery as the "cornerstone" of the fledgling nation. In doing so, Thomas Schott (1988) argued "Stephens had seriously compromised the Confederacy's public political stance" (334) and damaged its cause in the North and Europe.

Linton Stephens took to the hustings in the 1860 campaign to back U.S. Sen. Stephen Douglas for president, opposing most Southerners who supported Vice President John C. Breckenridge and Republican nominee Abraham Lincoln. In October of that year, Linton Stephens wrote Richard Johnston, a family friend who would write a biography of the elder Stephens brother, on politics. Insisting he had "the interest of a citizen who feels that he lives under the freest and best government on earth, and is utterly opposed to its destruction without cause" and did not want to hold political office, Linton Stephens offered his take on the increasingly likely possibility of Lincoln being elected. "I am not fighting now to defeat Lincoln's election," Stephens wrote. To live under his administration will be a great calamity, and to avert that calamity is a sufficient aim to inspire the efforts of any man who loves his country. But I am afraid that we shall be reduced to the alternative of living under his administration, or resisting it by force of arms" (Waddell, 1877, 178).

Linton Stephens criticized both the anti-slavery Republicans backing Lincoln in the North and extremists in the South supporting Breckinridge even as the sectional divide grew wider. "The leaders are undoubtedly responsible for the result," Stephens insisted. "Posterity will hold them so. I repeat, I am not fighting to defeat Lincoln; I am afraid that is impossible; but I fight now to prevent the 'precipitation' of the revolution which is intended to follow his election." Stephens stressed he was trying to tamper down the Breckinridge vote and show secession remained a minority position in key states like Georgia. "Nothing can defeat it but the defeat of Lincoln, (which is almost hopeless) or a clear break down of the Breckinridge cause in the South," he wrote Johnston. "It is of the last importance that the popular vote of the South, and especially the majority vote of Georgia, should be given against Breckinridge. If so, they may be discouraged from making the attempt. I am now working to that end" (Waddell, 1877, 178).

Warming to the topic, Stephens claimed "a great number of people cannot be made to believe" secession and war were real possibilities. "They are as incredulous as those were who laughed at Noah when he preached the flood," he wrote. "I trust that a kind Providence may avert from their incredulity the like terrible

retribution, which seems to me to be almost its necessary result. What a causeless catastrophe it will be! and how terrible its results! May the God of our great fathers preserve their degenerate sons in spite of themselves" (Waddell, 1877, 178).

But after Lincoln was elected, even as the sectional crisis intensified, Stephens did little besides urging his brother to do more to prevent immediate secession. While Alexander Stephens played a prominent part as political leaders across the South met in Montgomery to create the Confederacy (Davis, 1994), his younger brother opposed secession at the state convention in Milledgeville.

Despite voting against immediate secession at the state convention, Linton Stephens ended up writing a motion that ensured he and other opponents backed the majority. "The lack of unanimity in the action of this convention, in the passage of the Ordinance of Secession, indicates a difference of opinion amongst the members of the convention—not so much as to the rights which Georgia claims, or the wrongs of which she complains, as to the remedy and its application before a resort to other means of redress," Stephens wrote in the motion. "It is desirable to give expression to that intention, which really exists among all the members of this convention, to sustain the State in the course of action which she has pronounced to be proper for the occasion: therefore—Resolved, That all members of this convention, including those who voted against the said ordinance, as well as those who voted for it, will sign the same as a pledge of the unanimous determination of this convention to sustain and defend the State, in this her chosen remedy, with all its responsibilities and consequences, without regard to individual approval or disapproval of its adoption. (Waddell, 1877, 184)"

Despite Alexander's prestigious position in the Confederate government, the Stephens brothers largely proved ineffectual during the new nation's brief existence. Both opposed President Jefferson Davis's handling of the war, including conscription and the suspension of habeas corpus. Both brothers also pushed for the Davis administration to reach a peace deal, with Alexander Stephens meeting President Abraham Lincoln at Hampton Roads in a fruitless effort during the final weeks of the war. While Alexander Stephens rebuilt his political career, including serving a long stint in the U.S. House and briefly serving as governor before his death in 1883, Linton Stephens largely remained in private practice; he opposed Reconstruction, which led to federal charges—eventually dropped—for denying 15 Black men the vote in an election at the end of 1870. Linton married Mary Salter, whose mother helped his brother when he was imprisoned in Massachusetts, in 1867 and passed away in 1872 at the age of 49 of congestion of the brain after being ill a week (Schott, 1988).

"Linton Stephens was just as high-strung and prone to illness as his older brother," noted Schott (1988, 492). "Like Aleck, he was a perfectionist, often driving himself relentlessly in his work." Schott noted Linton's second marriage and the three children he and Mary had, along with his legal duties, undermined his health and helped lead to his early death.

Conclusions

In his pivotal study, James MacGregor Burns (1978) played up the importance of childhood in several key aspects of leadership including purpose, situational management, development, socialization, values, and self-esteem. With his isolated childhood, Linton Stephen's leadership efforts were undermined from the start. After losing his parents and being separated from his siblings,

the young Linton grew accustomed to being alone from the start. "The foundation of all my ideas of friendship was laid in the school of *solitude*," Stephens wrote about his childhood. "It came to me in the form of a want, not a possession" (Waddell, 1877, 9). Little wonder the week with Cornelia Hays made such an impression on Stephens that he wrote about it in-depth 40 years later.

While he faced several setbacks early in life, such as the loss of both of his parents before age three and profound childhood isolation, Linton Stephens developed into one of Georgia's premier lawyers, capped off by serving on the state Supreme Court at just 35 years old. His life intersected with several key moments in American history, including heightened sectional tensions, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. While he remained in his brother's shadow, Linton's experiences illuminate the complex relationship between personal psychology and public service in the 19th-century South.

The early losses in Linton's shaped his adult psychological landscape. Despite professional success, Stephens' letters reveal persistent alienation. His correspondence with Alexander contains numerous expressions of existential despair, particularly following the death of his first wife Emmeline in 1857. This psychological state mirrors what Faust (1977) identified among Southern intellectuals—a profound sense of detachment from their society despite defending its institutions.

Linton's life offers a compelling case study of how personal loneliness shaped intellectual and professional trajectories in the antebellum South. His experiences demonstrate that the alienation Faust (1977) found among Southern intellectuals extended beyond her "sacred circle" to figures like Stephens who achieved prominence in law instead of politics, academia, and agriculture. Despite his defense of slavery and Southern civilization, Stephens remained fundamentally isolated from his society—a dissonance that manifested in his political independence, stellar legal career, and persistent personal despair.

Stephens' defense of slavery placed him squarely within Faust's (1977) "sacred circle" of Southern intellectuals. This intellectual alignment demonstrates how personal alienation did not prevent Stephens from fully embracing Southern orthodoxy. Like the intellectuals Faust studied, he defended slavery as essential to Southern civilization while experiencing profound personal disconnection from that very society.

Like the members of the "sacred circle," Linton Stephens went his own way politically, often painting political parties in a negative light. On this point, he followed the example of his older brother Alexander who changed political affiliations several times, especially during the tumultuous decade before the Civil War (Schott, 1988). While the Stephens brothers might have prided themselves in putting their principles ahead of their political ambitions, their independence undermined their political effectiveness.

The impact of the Stephens' brothers' political isolation should not be underestimated. In the second volume of his magisterial of secession in the antebellum South, William Freehling (2007) stressed that for a brief time Alexander Stephens commanded the center of the political stage as Georgia grappled with leaving the Union at the end of the 1860. However, even while Georgia remained closely divided on the secession vote (Johnson, 1977), the older Stephens brother remained largely inactive in trying to keep the state in the Union. "To fathom Alexander Stephens is to

appreciate why a wounded invalid would inevitably crave Liberty Hall's cold comforts, compared to heated agitations against a pack of supposed fools," Freehling wrote (2007, 444). Freehling noted that James Henry Hammond, a core member of Faust's "sacred circle" stood on similar ground in South Carolina. "Neither Stephens nor Hammond had the personality to defy the establishment's closures," Freehling wrote. "With these personality types the best hope to thwart a highly focused Separatist minority, the unfocused majority, particularly in dawdling Georgia, could be steamrolled" (Freehling, 2007, 444). While Linton proved more active than his older brother and Hammond in stumping for Douglas and opposing secession, he proved ineffective with the motion he drafted at the Georgia convention serving as a final capitulation to immediate secession.

Still, even with his political ineffectiveness, a look at the life of Linton Stephens suggests that loneliness among leaders has historical continuity beyond contemporary discussions of workplace isolation. Stephens' example demonstrates how personal psychology can both motivate professional achievement and limit effectiveness, particularly in societies undergoing profound transformation. His experiences offer a nuanced perspective on the complex relationship between individual psychology, leadership, and historical change, a powerful reminder that even those who defend institutions may feel alienated from them just like the intellectuals Faust (1977) described.

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