MILITANT ABOLITIONIST GERRIT SMITH

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Great wealth never precluded men from committing themselves to redressing what they considered moral wrongs within American society. Great wealth allowed men the time and money to devote themselves absolutely to their passionate causes. During America's antebellum period, various social and political concerns attracted wealthy men's attentions; for example, temperance advocates, a popular cause during this era, considered alcohol a sin to be abolished. One outrageous evil, southern slavery, tightly concentrated many men's political attentions, both for and against slavery, and produced some intriguing, radical rhetoric and actions; foremost among these reform movements stood abolitionism, possibly one of the greatest reform movements of this era.

Among abolitionists, slavery prompted various modes of action, from moderate, to radical, to militant methods. The moderate approach tended to favor gradualism, which assumed the inevitability of society's progress toward the abolition of slavery. Radical abolitionists regarded slavery as an unmitigated evil to be ended unconditionally, immediately, and without any compensation to slaveholders. Preferring direct, political action to publicize slavery's iniquities, radical abolitionists demanded a personal commitment to the movement as a way to effect abolition of slavery. Some militant abolitionists, however, pushed their personal commitment to the extreme. Perceiving politics as a hopelessly ineffective method to end slavery, this fringe group of abolitionists endorsed violence as the only way to eradicate slavery.[1]

One abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, a wealthy landowner, lived in Peterboro, New York. As a young man, he inherited from his father hundreds of thousands of acres, and in the 1830s, Smith reportedly earned between $50,000 and $80,000 annually on speculative leasing investments. Gerrit Smith used his wealth to support such moral philanthropic causes as temperance, women's equality, and abolitionism. Though Smith spread his philanthropy among these various commitments, most of Smith's rhetoric and actions focused on radical, and then militant, abolitionism. His great wealth allowed him the freedom and time to zealously promote his doctrines of equality for all human beings and of immediate emancipation for all black people. In his brief "Autobiographical Sketch of the Life of Gerrit Smith," he understatedly described himself as primarily a politically active abolitionist.[2]

After Gerrit Smith died on December 28, 1874, the *New York Times* featured an

[1]James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors. The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 42-46; Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 17, 19, 38.

[2]Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints; Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1982), 100-1; Gerrit Smith, "Autobiographical Sketch of the Life of Gerrit Smith," in "'He Stands Like Jupiter': The Autobiography of Gerrit Smith," John R.

obituary and an editorial praising him as a philanthropist who actively and powerfully influenced and shaped public sentiment against slavery. Described as one who possessed an uncompromising mind incapable of occupying any middle ground or of qualifying intellectually reasoned conclusions, Smith used his "rare personal and intellectual courage to further his belief in the brotherhood of the human race." Though perceived by most of his friends as personable and dependable, many of Smith's antislavery colleagues eventually viewed his "extreme abolitionist" activities with contempt. Noting this criticism positively, the newspaper's editorial remarked that since Smith guided his life by noble principles, he portrayed rare personal and intellectual courage in advancing his convictions of antislavery and opposition to tyranny. During his abolitionist time period, Smith evolved into one of America's renowned militant antislavery activists; and he accordingly sustained political and social criticism for his bellicose, zealous rhetoric, uncompromising antislavery stance, and heavy financial support of militant causes, principally, John Brown's activities in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry.[3]

Three events in Smith's abolitionist career patently influenced him to join the militant fringe of antislavery. The first event occurred in 1835 when he attended a meeting at Utica, New York, to form the New York Anti-Slavery Society. An angry anti-abolitionist mob confronted the society's delegates, disrupted the meeting, and left Smith shocked at the opposing side's proslavery furor. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, that prompted the second event, the "Jerry Rescue." The Fugitive Slave Law mandated that all Americans lawfully must participate in returning escaped slaves to their rightful owners. Upon helping a former slave escape from Syracuse, Smith and his colleagues referred to their noteworthy illegal misdeeds as the Jerry Rescue. The third event, Smith's brief, ignominious congressional career of 1853 and 1854, helped push him into the militant abolitionist fringe and inspired him to advocate a combative, violent resolution to slavery. Smith's speeches and letters from 1835 to 1859 clearly revealed his evolving radicalism, his intransigent character, and his paradoxical views of abolitionism. His speeches and letters provided insight into how one man's fanaticism with a political, social, and moral cause enveloped his life and transported him from a position of esteem within the antislavery movement to one of scandal.

Gerrit Smith's initial involvement in the abolitionist movement began in the latter 1820s when he joined the American Colonization Society, a moderate abolitionist organization advocating removal of America's free blacks to Liberia. He contributed $9,000 to the Society between January 1828 and December 1835, rising in its ranks to become one of New York's leading antislavery advocates. Because removal ignored both southern slaves and the rights of free blacks as citizens, and failed to excite any antislavery fervor in both the North and South, Smith ultimately perceived this solution as too conservative. In 1833, he changed his moderate abolitionist position to one of radical, immediate emancipation,

McKivigan and Madeleine L. McKivigan, *New York History* 65 (April 1984): 193-94.

[3]"Mr. Gerrit Smith," *New York Times* 29 December 1874, 21-2.

prompting Smith's New York abolitionist friends, Alvan Stewart and Beriah Green, to urge him to attend the state's antislavery organizing convention in October 1835. Though disavowing his connection with the abolitionist label, Smith appeared ready to become politically active in the abolitionist cause. The American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), a national organization devoted exclusively to promoting immediate emancipation, attracted his focus; furthermore, the AASS used Smith's preference of moral suasion, which appealed to people's consciences to free America from slavery and racial discrimination. Smith reasoned that Americans could be induced easily and quickly to change their views from prejudice to brotherly love; thus America's colored citizens could achieve immediate emancipation.[4]

When six hundred antislavery delegates convened at the Second Presbyterian Church in Utica, New York, on October 20, 1835, a hostile mob composed of at least twenty locally prominent conservative citizens and led by their Oneida congressman Samuel Beardsley, rushed into the church to vilify the abolitionists and to disrupt the meeting. Reconvening the next day at Smith's Peterboro mansion, the delegates officially organized the New York Anti-Slavery Society (NYASS). Astonished at the Utica mob's hostile anti-abolitionist passion and malicious attempts to muzzle free speech, Smith empathized with his abolitionist friends' victimization.[5]

Smith played a prominent role in the society's deliberations and gave the keynote address, titled "Crime Against Abolitionists." Though he paradoxically denied being an abolitionist, this speech formed the design for Smith's eventual acceptance of radical political action to abolish slavery. Declaring his total opposition to silencing free speech, he proclaimed himself on the side of the moral reformers; namely, all those who opposed slavery. Smith believed that all "rights spring from a nobler source than human constitutions and government--from the favor of Almighty God." Since God bestowed the divine right of free speech to mankind, "we can never be guilty of its surrender, without consenting to exchange that freedom for slavery, and that dignity and usefulness for debasement and worthlessness." The South "admits that slavery cannot live unless the North is tongue-tied," but abolitionists realized the "incompatibility of free speech and slavery" and refused to remain quiet while "one sixth of our American people" are "crushed in the cruel folds of slavery."[6]

Equating abolitionism with an unsheathed sword that will expunge the "deep and

[4]Gerald Sorin, *The New York Abolitionists: A Case Study of Political Radicalism* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 31; Ralph Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1939), 121-22; Milton C. Sernett, "Common Cause: The Antislavery Alliance of Gerrit Smith and Beriah Green," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 21 (Fall 1986): 61-2; Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective*, 56-7.

[5]Harlow, 120-22; Sorin, *New York Abolitionists*, 32.

[6]Gerrit Smith, "Crime Against the Abolitionists," in *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*, Samuel J. May (Boston: Fields and Osgood, 1869), 400.

damning stain . . . from our nation," Smith equated the antislavery movement to a religious cause. After joining the Presbyterian Church in 1826, he became an ardent churchgoer and revivalist. Viewing slavery as a moral transgression that must be immediately repented, he thus perceived slaveholders as arrogant sinners and violators of the Ten Commandments. As Smith later stated, since free speech emanated from God, he believed that the Utica mob represented to him an instructive providential sign to become an active abolitionist. The Utica disruption exhibited proslavery's virulence to Smith, and pushed him away from the American Colonization Society into the AASS.[7]

Smith passionately involved himself in both the AASS and the NYASS. At the NYASS's first annual meeting in October 1836, members recognized that Smith's affluence and rhetorical skills forged him as a formidable leader in the antislavery cause and elected him the society's president. He served in this role until 1839. Coinciding with his presidency, Smith began printing and widely distributing his abolitionist speeches, essays, and letters. He further used his resources and his oratorical talents to influence the evangelical cause of immediate emancipation and to promote his radical view of a divinely purified nation filled with brotherly love of all men.[8] For Gerrit Smith, the drive against slavery represented work for the Lord, and he reveled in the crusading aspect of abolitionism.

During Smith's presidency, the members of the NYASS unanimously adopted a questionnaire to examine Whig and Democratic political candidates concerning their attitudes about slavery and abolitionism. Since antislavery newspapers such as *The Liberator* published candidates' responses with accompanying editorial comment, abolitionists' votes presumably would be withheld from any candidate who failed the interrogation. To maintain the purity of their cause and to avoid forming a third political party, abolitionists hoped this interrogation method, along with moral suasion, would favorably influence local and national elections. Smith and fellow abolitionist William Jay volunteered to question New York's gubernatorial candidates, William H. Seward (Whig) and Governor William L. Marcy (Democrat). Their answers proved unsatisfactory. Because abolitionists voted their former party lines and elected Seward, the New York election results of 1838 showed that both moral suasion and the query method failed to influence abolitionists to vote for antislavery candidates.[9]

At the NYASS convention in 1839, a politically frustrated Smith declared that all abolitionists must participate in the Underground Railroad and help fugitive slaves escape. Smith already actively participated in the illegal Underground Railroad. In 1838 and 1839, for instance, he sheltered escaped slaves and then furnished them with transportation to Canada. He also unhesitatingly used his wealth to emancipate slaves by buying them from

[7]Smith, "Crime Against the Abolitionists," 403; Harlow, 135; Sernett, 61, 66, 68.

[8]Harlow, 138, 141, 144; Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 12-13, 18.

[9]Sorin, *New York Abolitionists*, 34; Harlow, 267.

their owners. In 1841, for example, Smith paid $3,500 to emancipate a Mississippi slave family of seven people.[10]

From 1839 to 1840, Smith's sentiments shifted from opposing a northern abolitionist political party to understanding that only political action, not moral suasion, would abolish slavery. Since the Democrats and the Whigs attracted both antislavery and proslavery believers, these political organizations necessarily compromised their doctrines to win local, state, and national offices. Smith reasoned that only independent political action would elect true abolitionists to Congress, thereby enabling Congress to pass legislation abolishing slavery. When his fellow abolitionists, Alvan Stewart and Myron Holley, called for united political action, Smith's reservations dissolved; he realized the fruitlessness of the interrogation method and of trying to work with the two major political parties. On April 1, 1840, in Albany, New York, Stewart and Holley headed the formation of the Liberty Party. This abolitionist third party dedicated itself solely to the eradication of American slavery.[11]

Smith believed that abolitionists inherently possessed a moral, religious duty to use all means necessary to overthrow the sin of slavery. Since voters ignored the results of the questionnaires and continued to vote their party lines, interrogating candidates proved useless; and since "no National party in this country, whether ecclesiastical or political, is . . . to be trusted on the question of slavery," a third, temporary political party focused solely on eliminating slavery appeared viable. Because of its temporary, unorthodox nature, the Liberty Party would fail to attract those men Smith viewed as selfish and ambitious; this third party would escape corruption by conventional politics, would remain pure, and would thus purify the political process. After the abolition of slavery had been attained, he and his colleagues morally could return to the two established, and purified, political parties. The milieu of third party politics and radical abolitionism appealed to Smith's zealous nature.[12]

Writing "To the Friends of the Slave," Smith observed that he incensed many of his neighbors when he accused them of voting proslavery. Because they failed to consider slavery when they elected "slaveholders and slavery men"--Whigs and Democrats--who supported both abolition and popular national issues such as high tariffs and a national bank, Smith called his neighbors "false abolitionists." Smith maintained that "they are bound to think of slavery when they vote. . . . Slavery, tyranny, aristocracy, will never cease, [as long as] . . . the individual may be sacrificed to the good of society." Since his neighbors ignored the Liberty Party and cast worthless votes, Smith called for all authentic abolitionists to secede from the "proslavery parties whether political or ecclesiastical" and join the true abolitionist party.[13]

[10]Harlow, 269-70.

[11]Sewell, 45, 48, 66; Sorin, *New York Abolitionists*, 34; Harlow, 163, 148; Sernett, 69; Friedman, 115.

[12]Sewell, 67, 83; Gerrit Smith, Peterboro, New York, to Abolitionists, 13 November 1843, The Gerrit Smith Collection, Special Collections, Ablah Library, Wichita State University, Wichita.

This letter highlighted two of the three uncompromising principles Smith espoused throughout his abolitionist career. First, that anyone committed to antislavery must endorse unequivocally the abolitionist cause. Antislavery voters must join the Liberty Party, give complete support to the abolitionist candidates, and never vote for Whigs or Democrats since they failed to absolutely uphold the antislavery movement. Second, Smith obliquely mentioned separating from an ecclesiastical party. Many of his later speeches and letters railed against the mainline churches that refused to stand against slavery. In two letters, for example, addressed to Madison County and Smithfield abolitionists, Smith explained his rationale for opposing "proslavery politics . . . [and] . . . proslavery religion." Smith expected the church, as the main voice of God, to be purer than the federal government. His fury pointed directly to the clergy who failed to denounce slavery and instead sided with proslavery politicians. Regarding the clergy as hypocrites and "unworthy and dangerous spiritual guides," Smith believed that their "atrocious wickedness" stemmed from their failure to disavow themselves and their churches from the two political parties. "What greater absurdity could these . . . minister[s] of Satan, not of Jesus Christ . . . utter than that men can help overthrow slavery, whilst they cling to parties which are the very pillars of slavery." Smith's answer to speeding up the abolition of slavery lay in destroying both the mainstream churches and political parties, which gave succor to proslavery's adherents.[14] With these influential organizations destroyed, citizens thus would have only the abolitionist movement as their politics and their religion. Smith seemed to allow his intemperate nature to surface occasionally; for example, hoping to influence here his Peterboro-area Liberty Party colleagues to secede from both their mainstream churches and their political parties.

During 1843, the Liberty Party made headway in the Peterboro area. The state and local elections produced a notable swing of votes to the third party's candidates; the Liberty Party totals rose from 580 in 1841 to 1,785. In a letter to his Liberty Party allies, Smith declared that though the Liberty Party "was a novel and bold experiment . . . [it was an] experiment . . . well worth making." Since the Liberty Party candidates swept Madison County, Smith optimistically concluded that the antislavery cause would soon spill into other New York counties and then throughout the rest of America, and in a few years "slavery would be no more." Smith's support of the Liberty Party as the only true antislavery party remained unwavering; he clearly believed in the efficacy of one-idea voting. His optimism quickly dimmed, however, as Smith realized his antislavery efforts bore no results either in the rest of the North or in the South.[15]

[13]Smith, Peterboro, to the Friends of the Slave, 7 March 1843, Smith Collection.

[14]Harlow, 204-5; Smith, Peterboro, to the Abolitionists of the County of Madison, 5 February 1844, Smith Collection; Smith, Peterboro, to the Friends of the Slave in the Town of Smithfield, 12 March 1844, Smith Collection; Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism; Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 178-79.

[15]Smith, Report from the County of Madison, 13 November 1843, Smith Collection.

The third argument against slavery, which Smith introduced in 1844, involved the United States Constitution as an antislavery document. Even though the Constitution did not explicitly prohibit slavery, Smith ascertained that neither did it sanction slavery. Conveniently disregarding the Founding Fathers as slaveholders, Smith concluded that since the Constitution's authors omitted the word "slavery," they clearly affirmed the document's antislavery character. Writing to the renowned abolitionist poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, Smith argued why the AASS wrongly suggested that the Constitution "is a pro-slavery instrument." Since the Constitution's Preamble and the Bill of Rights both established the equality of man, Smith proclaimed that the Constitution, which "knows no man as a slave," sought to pronounce itself and the Union as wholly antislavery. Attempting to invalidate the proslavery argument, Smith then dissected the Constitution's various provisions, which proslavery people used to justify America as a slaveholding nation.[16]

Three arguments, introduced in his letter to Whittier, remained foremost among Smith's lengthy thesis. First, the federal government continued proslavery policies, not because slaves were counted only as three-fifths in apportioning representatives, but because white men continued to elect "pro-slavery men to office." Second, even though slavery continued unabated in the South, the Constitution had stipulated the date of 1808 to end the international slave trade. Smith believed that even if the Constitution "does less against the African slave trade, than is desirable," people needed to give "credit for what [the Constitution]" ordered; namely, it had outlawed the "pro-slavery operation." Third, and most important for Smith's future illegal activities, he invalidated the Constitution's fugitive slave provision. Smith noted that "greater reliance is laid on this, than on any other, to prove, that the Constitution is pro-slavery." Those proslavery advocates who believed that the Constitution's framers meant slaves, wrongly adhered to the proslavery construction of the Constitution. Smith based his reasoning primarily on the framers' eliminating the words "slave . . . slavery . . . [and] servitude" from the Constitution. Also, according to Smith, the fugitive slave provisions stipulated that "service or labor due" defined someone under servitude and thus returnable as a fugitive; the slave defined as chattel by the Southern slave codes, remained outside this provision.[17] Smith's antislavery constitutional arguments illustrated his evolution to the radical abolitionist side. By reiterating the themes of proslavery churches, proslavery political parties, and antislavery Constitution as his basis for radical political abolitionism, Smith justified disobeying federal government laws. When he became ostracized from mainstream abolitionism, he continued blindly to believe zealously in the rightness of his moral positions.

Realizing the fruitlessness of expecting slavery's imminent eradication, Smith completely broke from both the Liberty Party's one-idea platform and the party's impermanent nature. By 1847, Smith considered Whigs and Democrats as hopelessly intransigent toward changing their proslavery attitudes; he believed, therefore, that the

[16]Harlow, 280; Friedman, 114; Smith to John Greenleaf Whittier, 18 July 1844, Smith Collection.

Liberty Party must remain permanent as the only moral choice for voters. Since Smith's revamped belief opposed the Liberty Party's integral foundation, a splinter faction of Liberty Party members, including Gerrit Smith, formed the Liberty League. The League's broadened platform not only endorsed the abolition of slavery, but supported other radical reforms; the League upheld, for example, the abolition of the United States postal service, and the dismantling of the Army and Navy. Formally seceding from the Liberty Party, the League clearly viewed itself as a viable political party, willing to adopt measures to govern the United States. To ensure that voters viewed the League as a permanent, unadulterated antislavery entity, wholly different from Whigs and Democrats, the new party excluded anyone from its list of potential officeholders remotely tinged with proslavery beliefs.[18]

Although Smith hoped the Liberty Party would eventually absorb the League, he plainly recognized that the Liberty Party's single-issue stance clearly limited its attraction to voters. In a faultfinding letter to the editor of the *Liberty Press*, the Liberty Party's periodical, Smith attempted to explain this potential liability and to defend his reasons for forming the splinter party. He pointedly contrasted the differences between the League and the Liberty Party. Since it included equality for all humankind and other policies that enhanced equal rights, the League augmented the Party's single issue of abolishing slavery; for example, the League embraced issues of free trade and unlimited ownership of land. By adamantly adhering to its narrow single issue agenda, the Liberty Party could never "act rationally" as a viable political party; "it disqualif[ies] itself for the intelligent administration of government, and the proper discharge of all the duties of government." Smith charged the party with "stupidity" and "pride of consistency" in its stubborn refusal to "obey the law of progress."[19] In Smith's eyes, the Liberty League fashioned a useful platform for governing. Smith's altered feelings for the Liberty Party certainly illustrated both his changeable nature and his transformed beliefs about the possibility of eradicating slavery through political action.

Continuing to justify his break from the party, Smith understatedly called himself "a man of change" in a letter to *The Emancipator*, a prominent Boston antislavery publication. Declaring that he now perceived a single-issue party as "absurd," he vowed that he never would again participate in organizing a "temporary political party . . . which goes for the promotion of but a single specific reform." Smith consequently declared his lack of confidence in the Liberty Party's abolitionist doctrine and regretted his former allegiance to it. Since Smith proclaimed himself a changed man, he regarded attending the national Liberty Party convention at Buffalo in October 1847 as an evangelical mission to convert the rest of the Liberty Party's members to his adjusted views. In his speech of October 20, 1847, Smith trusted that the Liberty delegates would listen "to wise counsels," namely Gerrit

[17]Ibid.

[18]Sorin, *New York Abolitionists*, 35: Sewell, 118-19; Friedman, 118; Alan M. Kraut and Phyllis F. Field, "Politics Versus Principles: The Partisan Response to 'Bible Politics' in New York State," *Civil War History* 25 (June 1979): 116.

[19]Smith, Peterboro, to Editor of the *Liberty Press*, 3 July 1847, Smith Collection.

Smith himself, and adopt his extended notions of reform. If the Liberty Party followed his advice, "it would make rapid progress to victory" and portray itself as an "attractive model of a political party."[20]

Smith, as political missionary, obviously viewed his righteous strategy as the only mechanism to achieve total reform of society and government. He became dogmatic in his convictions, however, as he grew more exasperated and disheartened with hypocrites who willingly brokered their antislavery convictions for political gains. In a justification of his radical antislavery commitment, written to his friend and colleague, Salmon P. Chase, Smith clearly displayed his impatience with Chase's refusal to support his reasoned proclamation for outlawing slavery in the United States. He wondered why Chase, an ardent abolitionist, refused to acknowledge Smith's antislavery resolution at the recent Liberty Party national convention, when clearly the "cause of the slave calls for that approval." In a frustrated, almost mocking tone, Smith ended his letter with the following barbed question: "[Is] it not high time for the Liberty party to have done with running after the pro-slavery speculations on the intentions of the Constitution?" He derisively replied, "[L]et the Liberty party look into [the Constitution's] fair free face, instead of mousing about behind its back among the heaps of pro-slavery speculations, which pro-slavery commentators have piled up there."[21]

As the Liberty Party moved toward a merger with moderate antislavery Whigs and Democrats to form the Free Soil Party in 1848, Smith attempted to revive the former Liberty Party spirit of ardent abolitionism and combine it with the League's radical reforms. Clearly unwilling to forsake the party he founded and nurtured, but feeling abandoned by his formerly devoted abolitionist colleagues, Smith organized a National Liberty Party rump convention in Buffalo, June 14 and 15, where delegates selected him as their presidential candidate. He readily accepted this nomination and ran on the True Liberty Party ticket, winning only 2,545 votes out of one million total votes in his home state of New York. Moderate abolitionists deserted all factions of the Liberty Party and cast their votes for Martin Van Buren, the Free Soil Party's presidential candidate.[22]

The Compromise of 1850, particularly the stringent Fugitive Slave Law, pushed Smith further into the radical abolitionist crowd. The Compromise combined popular sovereignty in the western territory gained from the Mexican-American War, admitting California as a free state, ending the Washington D.C. slave trade, and allowing southern slaveholders an easier time recovering their escaped slaves. To garner northern antislavery support, Smith, Samuel May, and other similarly-minded abolitionists held a series of protest conventions centered on the Fugitive Slave Law. In Syracuse on January 9, 1851, Smith chaired the

[20]Smith, Peterboro, to Editors of *The Emancipator*, 23 August 1847, Smith Collection; Speech of Smith, "On the Character, Scope, and Duties of the Liberty Party," in *Agitation for Freedom: The Abolitionist Movement*, ed. Donald G. Mathews (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972), 107.

[21]Mathews, 94; Smith, Peterboro, to S.P. Chase, "Unconstitutionality of Every Part of American Slavery," Albany: S.W. Green, Patriot Office, 1 November 1847, Smith Collection.

Anti-Fugitive Slave Law Meeting. Under his potent leadership, delegates approved every one of his seventeen resolutions. These resolutions stated that all true abolitionists should pledge themselves to resist the Fugitive Slave Act by any means possible; "every law in favor of slavery is, most emphatically . . . no law." Smith pleaded for all righteous citizens to disobey the Fugitive Slave Law; since civil government answered to the "laws of God," the federal government "is entitled to no authority or obedience" whenever it violated God's laws. He and his followers were not rebels for disobeying laws; rather Smith declared Congress rebellious for violating God's laws. Smith appealed also to northern blacks in his calls for militant action, and suggested that white antislavery activists "presume not . . . to prescribe what you shall do for the overthrow of American slavery. It is for you to determine . . . by what means you shall undertake to [en]compass this object. . . . [W]e need your help to overthrow the blood and satanic system of American slavery."[23]

Smith hoped that his caustic, accusatory words shocked the public. At this point in his movement toward the militant side, Smith apparently realized that by speaking forcefully, he lost no support and might even entice some borderline antislavery activists to his side. In subsequent speeches and letters saturated with contempt for the federal government as a "lying counterfeit civil government," Smith indicted the government for criminal activities against freedom and liberty. He accused Congress of supporting slavery as a "National Institution" and turning America into a "hunting ground for human prey." Because Smith plainly believed that political action failed to effect slavery's eradication, he also publicly called for the overthrow of slavery. His fellow abolitionists apparently bartered their convictions for the sake of political gain in the Free Soil Party, a party Smith viewed as proslavery. The federal government turned the country into hunting grounds and itself into man-catching bloodhounds. For Smith, the 1850s began on a dispiriting note. Blaming the unrighteous federal government for making its citizens "ignorant and base and wretched" by keeping them in slavery, Smith hoped to inflame the antislavery passion of reformers and attract them to the Liberty Party's prospective rebirth. To redeem the federal government and bring needed reforms to America, the Liberty Party for Gerrit Smith ironically still represented the only noble political vehicle in the country.[24]

The second event in Smith's life that shaped the growing militancy of his convictions occurred at another attempt to resuscitate the Liberty Party. William "Jerry" McHenry, a fugitive slave from Missouri who had been working as a barrel-maker in Syracuse, was arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law by United States deputy marshals. When Smith, Samuel May, and the other Liberty Party delegates learned of McHenry's arrest and

[22]Friedman, 118-19; Harlow, 182, 187.

[23]Speech of Smith at Anti-Fugitive Slave Law Meeting, Syracuse, New York, 9 January 1851, Smith Collection; Harlow, 188-90, 294.

[24]Speech of Gerrit Smith, "Made in the National Liberty Party Convention at Buffalo," 17 September 1851, Smith Collection; Smith, Peterboro, to the Voters of the United States, 15 July 1851, Smith Collection.

imprisonment in Judge Joseph F. Sabine's chambers, they acted on their ideology of disobeying illegitimate laws. Adhering to Smith's pacifist entreaties to avoid harming any law enforcement officials, twenty-five of the delegates, including Smith and May, attacked Judge Sabine's office, broke through the locked door, freed McHenry, and eventually spirited him to Canada. Only one rescuer was eventually convicted for the successful Jerry Rescue. For Smith, the Jerry Rescue clearly validated his militant polemics. Rescuing a fugitive slave demonstrated the strength of local public opinion in defying federal law. Smith proposed to honor their defiant achievement at anniversary celebrations. Throughout the 1850s, Syracuse abolitionists met each October 1 to celebrate the Jerry Rescue and to attack both slavery and the federal government.[25]

The Fugitive Slave Law and the Jerry Rescue eventually aroused public antislavery sentiment and led to an unexpected occurrence in Smith's life. In 1852, the Twenty-second New York Congressional District elected him to Congress on the Free Democrat Party ticket. Claiming he lacked political experience, Smith reluctantly accepted his constituents' summons; in a public letter, he asserted, "I will so discharge [my] duties, as neither to dishonor myself, nor you." Smith, more importantly, revealed the credo by which he would serve in Congress. His "peculiar political creed" embraced previously advocated reforms such as free trade and abolishing the army and navy; Smith now added equal rights for women and blacks. Foremost, though, he demanded the eradication of slavery. If any voter had failed to construe his motivations, this letter addressed any such misconceptions.[26]

In scathing terms, the *New-York Daily Times* reported Smith's election. Describing him as "an ultraist" because he zealously believed in the "absolute rightness" of all subjects that dominated his thinking, the editorial firmly predicted an unsuccessful congressional career for Smith. The writer foresaw Smith's inability to gain a leadership position because representatives, far from being visionaries and idealists, "are practical men." Though Smith would earnestly argue and deliberate his points with "ingenuity and ability," his "influence in Congress . . . will amount to just none at all." The editorialist perceptively analyzed Smith's idiosyncrasies and shrewdly suspected that he ignobly would fail to adequately represent his constituents. The district apparently elected him on a surge of abolitionist sentiment resulting from both the Jerry Rescue and from Smith's unwavering pounding of the Fugitive Slave Law. Knowing Smith's penchant for uncompromising, radical abolitionism, his constituents seemingly chose to disregard his obstinacy and unwillingness to respect opposing views. As Smith supporter Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts remarked, the country needed Smith's services in Congress to promote the cause of liberty; namely, to promote the cause of antislavery.[27]

[25]Harlow, 295, 303, 329; John R. McKivigan and Madeleine Leveille, "The 'Black Dream' of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 20 (Fall 1985): 53.

[26]Smith, Peterboro, to the Voters of the Counties of Oswego and Madison, 5 November 1852, Smith Collection.

Soon after arriving in Congress, Smith's speeches focused on his usual topics of abolitionism, free trade, and peace. Then, in December 1853, Senator Stephen Douglas introduced the third version of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which ultimately repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allowed the territories' citizens to decide the slavery question. Along with Senators Charles Sumner and Salmon Chase and Representatives Joshua Giddings, Edward Wade, and Alexander De Witt, Smith signed Chase's abolitionist appeal against the bill. This protest denounced the bill as "an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region . . . free laborers . . . and convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves." The signers warned freedom-loving citizens that its passage would cause "the blight of slavery" to smother the country.[28]

On April 6, 1854, Smith gave his only speech in the House of Representatives against the Kansas-Nebraska bill. He reiterated his predictable antislavery, constitutional arguments, and asserted a fresh reason to oppose the bill based on the Constitution's limits on state sovereignty. Since the Founding fathers refused to repeat the Article of Confederation's mistakes, they created a government "too broad and binding to consist with State sovereignty. . . . [The Constitution] denies the State many specific powers, each of which is vital to sovereignty." Giving customary equal time to both church and state, Smith denounced the federal government as a "bastard democracy" and labeled the hypocritical churches a "bastard Christianity, which endorses this bastard democracy . . . . The fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man . . . are quite foreign to our sham democracy and our sham Christianity." Smith branded himself a prophet and predicted a violent end to slavery. He warned that this method of abolition "would constitute one of the bloodiest chapters in all the book of time . . . and a reckoning for deep and damning wrongs, such an outbursting of smothered and pent-up revenge, as living man has never seen."[29]

Because it violated Smith's belief in the principle of majority rule, he refused to participate in a Whig scheme to make it impossible to secure a voting quorum for the bill, thus, foreshadowing his eventual resignation. Abolitionists naturally assailed Smith for taking the villainous majority's side, and on August 7, 1854, he resigned from Congress. Smith justified his behavior to his constituents. He complained about strictures on his speeches and about congressional abolitionists opposing his views. Smith carefully explained his refusal to join the Whig scheme to prevent voting on the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Noting that if a minority holds "the majority at bay," no matter how righteous the minority's cause, the democratic foundations of the Constitution would be violated; Smith never would consent to a rule that worked against democracy. "I could not believe that [the House rules] were made for so wrongful--for so anti-democratic--a purpose." In blaming his brief tenure on those in Congress who prevented his free speech, Smith deflected having to

[27]"Gerrit Smith," *New York Times*, 8 November 1852; Harlow, 313.

[28]Harlow, 327; *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., vol. 28, pt. 1, 1854; "Shall Slavery Be Permitted in Nebraska?", *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., vol. 28, pt. 1:281-284, 1854.

[29]"Speech of Gerrit Smith on the Nebraska Bill," 6 April 1854, Smith Collection.

confront his own uncooperative fanaticism and stubbornness. Perceiving himself with apparent anxiety as an antislavery rebel, he seemingly believed his fellow colleagues imposed strictures on him. Ironically, the antislavery issue that led Smith to Congress provoked his resignation.[30]

After resigning from Congress, Smith abandoned his constitutional arguments for abolition and concentrated solely on a violent end to slavery as the only solution. Disheartened with the South's refusal to end slavery, disheartened with the federal government's seeming proslavery stand, and disheartened with his fellow abolitionists who indubitably supported the proslavery political parties, he gave his attention to militant abolitionism, particularly to John Brown and his revolutionary cause. Smith first met John Brown in 1849 when Smith sold Brown a 244-acre tract in Essex County, New York. Brown and his family lived there until 1855. Influenced by the antislavery Kansas Aid Movement, Brown emigrated to Kansas and joined the free-state struggle. To help the Browns settle in Kansas, Smith donated $60 received from a Radical Political Abolitionists convention held in Syracuse. In March 1856, after pledging $3,000 to the Kansas movement, Smith stated his lack of objection if the movement needed to use his money to purchase weapons for self-defense against the "Border Ruffians."[31]

Under Smith's leadership, the Kansas Aid Movement in Madison County passed a militant proclamation to protect the abolitionists in Kansas; for example, the mandate advocated that citizens attack federal troops stationed in Kansas. This mandate certainly exemplified Smith's encampment in the militant antislavery wing. In Smith's Jerry Rescue anniversary message of 1856, he reiterated his call to arms and justified his militant views; since the government conspired against human rights, rebelling against the proslavery federal government was legitimate. Though Smith ironically still held pacifist views, and in 1856 served as vice-president of the American Peace Society, he plainly committed himself to ending slavery by violent means.[32]

Brown and Smith met in Chicago in June 1857. Smith gave Brown $350 and loaned him another $110 to help finance Brown's band of free-staters. At Smith's Peterboro home the following February, Brown presented his Harper's Ferry plan to the "Secret Six." This covert group included Franklin B. Sanborn; wealthy industrialist George Luther Stearns, who also heavily financed Brown; physician Samuel Gridley Howe; and Unitarian ministers Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Theodore Parker. Appealing to the group's militant antislavery stance, Brown claimed that his plan to liberate the slaves was the only way left to end slavery. Reluctantly acquiescing to Brown's plan, Smith pensively noted to Sanborn

[30]Harlow, 330; Smith to His Constituents, n.p., 7 August 1854; Smith letter, n.p., 5 November 1852; *New York Times*, 8 November 1852; *Congressional Globe*, vol. 28, pt. 1, 1854.

[31]Harlow, 305, 336, 340; McKivigan and Leveille, 54-5; Jeffrey Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators, John Brown, The Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 71, 95.

that he could see no other way to destroy slavery. Smith's vice-presidency of the national American Peace Society clearly presented an obstacle to his public support of Brown. To protect both his pacifist reputation and future political ambitions, he eventually chose to remain uninformed of Brown's specific plans.[33] Financially supporting Brown, though, apparently presented no problem for Smith.

After Smith's disastrous campaign for governor of New York on the People's State Ticket in 1858, he angrily concluded that all true believers in his cause "[had] been swallowed up by the political parties and seem very willing to be the dupes of party leaders." In an acrimonious, melancholy speech delivered to his supporters, he attributed all current antislavery work to those faithful followers "outside of political parties," and particularly in Kansas by "John Brown, the fighter." His anger at losing the governor's race, combined with his frustration over the apparent desertion of his former abolitionist supporters, prompted Smith unequivocally to support Brown's abolitionist movement. Brown's general plans to carry his war into the South and to trust the slaves to end slavery attracted Smith to his scheme. Since Smith regarded the slaves as the ones to abolish slavery, he listened sympathetically to Brown; and in April 1859, still paradoxically maintaining ignorance of Brown's final plans, Smith pledged another $4,000 to the scheme.[34]

By the summer of 1859, Smith obviously recognized that Brown's plot involved violence. In a bitter letter to John Thomas, head of that year's Jerry Rescue organizing committee, he alleged that the anniversary celebration had become a farce and declined to attend the ceremony. Smith explained that shortly after the Jerry Rescue in 1851, he had become disappointed in his fellow abolitionists. After each anniversary celebration, they defaced their humanity and acted hypocritically by returning to their "proslavery churches [and voting] for men who acknowledged a law for slavery . . . they soon sunk down to the low level of their political and church parties." Sensing that Brown soon would institute his violent plan, Smith forewarned Thomas about slavery's bloody end. Noting that "it is perhaps too late to bring slavery to an end by peaceable means . . . my fears that it must be wiped out in blood . . . have grown into belief." Since white people failed to abolish slavery, he further asserted that blacks now felt "they must deliver themselves."[35]

John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and his subsequent capture surprisingly shocked and unnerved Gerrit Smith. Smith seemingly remained unconvinced that Brown would actually invade the South and try to liberate slaves.[36] Financially supporting Brown's cause and choosing ignorance of Brown's actual plans, plainly allowed Smith to believe

[32]Harlow, 351, 355.

[33]McKivigan and Leveille, 55-6; Rossbach, 6.

[34]"The Abolition Party," *New York Times*, 25 November 1858; Merton Lynn Dillon, *The Abolitionists: The Growth of a Dissenting Minority* (New York: Norton, 1979), 229-30, 232; McKivigan and Leveille, 57.

[35]Smith, Peterboro, to John Thomas, 27 August 1859, Smith Collection.

[36]Rossbach, 226.

disingenuously that he maintained a margin of noninvolvement, thereby allowing Smith to continue a sterile association with Brown. His facade of noninvolvement soon changed.

Within two days of Brown's capture, the first reports of the raid appeared in newspapers and mentioned Smith's name as a possible accomplice. Federal authorities found in Brown's possession a letter, dated June 4, 1859, and a canceled bank draft for $100, dated August 22, 1859, both from Smith. On October 20, 1859, the front page of the *New York Times* prominently featured Smith's Jerry Rescue letter of that year, which to many readers, definitely signaled Smith's prior knowledge of Brown's raid. This letter "will be read with interest as a prophecy . . . of the outbreak at Harper's Ferry." The next day, the *Times* similarly branded the letter found in Brown's possessions, as the "most important and significant of all the letters from Smith." Smith wrote, "I have done what I could thus far for Kansas, and what I could to keep you at your Kansas work." He then offered "my draft for $200 . . . . You live in our hearts . . . we pray to God that you may have strength to continue in your Kansas work. My wife [and I] hold [you] in very high esteem." Because he thus was linked directly to Brown as an accomplice, Smith apparently suffered a mental and physical collapse. He retired in seclusion to his Peterboro mansion. On November 7, 1859, five days after he learned of Brown's death sentence, Smith's family committed him to the New York State Asylum for the Insane at Utica. Smith remained there until soon after Brown's death; on December 29, 1859, apparently recovered from his illness, Smith returned to Peterboro.[37]

Theories abounded about Smith's seclusion. Historian Jeffrey Rossbach speculated that his guilty conscience, combined with a fear of public approbation for allying himself with a seeming lunatic, pushed Smith to suffer a breakdown. Smith's great wealth afforded him the opportunity to hide; nevertheless, he still needed to resolve his own association with Brown. According to historians John R. McKivigan and Madeleine Leveille, even on his deathbed, Smith refused to admit any intimate connection with Brown's raid.[38] He forsook his pacifist side when he committed himself to aiding Brown. Following Harper's Ferry, however, his guilt over disavowing his pacifist beliefs and the knowledge that he abetted the violence obviously induced Smith's mental and physical collapse.

Shortly after Smith's release from the asylum, he joined the newly formed Republican Party, and once the Civil War began, loyally endorsed the Union cause. After the war's end, Smith continued to gain financially through railroad investments and continued his philanthropy. According to his family and friends, Smith softened, lost his evangelical fervor, and concentrated on people's positive natures rather than their wickedness.[39]

By representing a side of history illustrating how emotional fervor can provoke

[37]Harlow 411; "Letter From Gerrit Smith to Capt. Brown," *New York Times*, 21 October 1859; Rossbach, 226-7.

[38]Rossbach, 228; Harlow, 413; McKivigan and Leveille, 51.

[39]Harlow, 428, 479, 483; *New York Times* 29 December 1874. Smith gave the town of Peterboro $20,000 for road building and $30,000 to the town of Oswego for a public library.

committed citizens, Smith's place in American history clearly stemmed from the zealous fringe of the abolitionist movement. Gerrit Smith's dream of true equality for all humankind and his journey through the abolitionist period to fulfill his dream definitely showcased a militant microcosm of radical political history. Contradictions abounded in Smith's life. His speeches and writings contained numerous examples of his paradoxical, changeable temperament from moderation to militancy, and clearly exemplified this period's emotional potential for those Americans such as Gerrit Smith who passionately believed in the antislavery cause. Because Smith's great wealth provided him time to devote to this moral cause, the antislavery movement gained a colorful character. As Smith described himself in 1856, "he stands, like Jupiter, thundering, and shaking with his thunderbolts his throne itself."[40] Gerrit Smith unquestionably thundered and definitely shook with his words a nation that seemingly resisted his antislavery fervor but eventually moved to his moral place in society.

[40]McKivigan and McKivigan, 199.