Chapter 3
Conservatism, Transformation, and
the War for the Union

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In 1863, a young Pennsylvanian soldier named Caldwell worried that fighting for mere political unity would appear selfish, and would not be understood by the world at large. The addition of “the magic word freedom,” he thought, would raise the cause to an altogether different and higher level.¹ For Caldwell, it was the Emancipation Proclamation that transformed what would have been a mere nationalist struggle to a crusade with meaning for what Abraham Lincoln called “the whole family of man.” Caldwell’s words are immediately intelligible to us because his conception of the Civil War as having been ennobled by a struggle for the very tangible freedom of enslaved African Americans matches our dominant narrative of the war as one in which the American nation passed through a “fiery trial” and emerged a better place.

Millions of Northerners such as Caldwell formed a swelling chorus backing Lincoln’s own rhetorical journey in justification of the Civil War. In his message to Congress on July 4, 1861, the sixteenth president had defined the Union cause as a defense of America’s experiment in “popular Government.” Having established and administered a constitutional republic, the United States now faced the challenge of “its successful maintenance against formidable internal attempts to overthrow it.” In his Second Inaugural Address of March, 1865, however, Lincoln would articulate the meaning of the war in dramatic language as redemption for the nation’s sin of slavery: “If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.”²

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This picture of Northerners on a political journey from a conservative defense of the Union to an embrace of the radical doctrine of emancipation is a compelling one. This is the narrative that underpins most historical writing on the conflict that has appeared since the 1960s. James M. McPherson has argued that the war wrought a “second American Revolution” by ridding the nation of slavery and righting it with its own ideals—to use a Lincolnian phrase. It makes sense that such a transformative war should have a transformative effect on public opinion. It fits much of the evidence, too. As historian Drew Gilpin Faust has argued, Northerners instinctively wanted their increasing sacrifices to be matched by increasingly expansive goals. Peter J. Parish has similarly written of the ratchet effect of mass slaughter on public expectations of the meaning of the struggle.

Yet we should also be aware of the limits of the North’s transformation. Freedom, of course, had multiple meanings. As well as giving moral purpose to the war to antislavery Northerners such as Caldwell, it can also be conceived as a “magic” in a different sense to what this Pennsylvanian soldier intended for it motivated millions of white people to make great sacrifices on behalf of their cause without ever embracing its implications for African American freedom. The Republican New York banker George Templeton Strong, whose frank diary has made him a familiar commentator on the Civil War’s progress in countless books on the conflict, captured the tentative nature of the North’s embrace of emancipation as late as 1864 when he observed that one would think abolition “a good word and likely to be popular with a free people, but it isn’t.” He went on to confess, “I never call myself an abolitionist without the feeling that I am saying something rather reckless and audacious”—neither of which were traits normally associated with this sober, cautious banker.

On a psychological and a political level, one of the immense challenges of the Civil War for Northerners was reconciling the dramatic changes they saw happening with their vision of what they believed their society and their nation should be and had always been. For many, this was an impossible task. Although most Democrats swore their loyalty to the Union, most of these were also implacably opposed to black freedom and to what they saw as the “tyranny” of the Lincoln administration. Some were also opposed to the military subjugation of the South on principle. A correspondent of Ohio Democratic congressman S. S. Cox informed him just before the outbreak of war that “while the democracy of your district...are without exception in favor of the preservation of the Union, they are also almost as unanimous in their opinion that coercion is not only impolitic but