HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 13 Issue 4 (2024)

Use of Rhetoric by All Stances in the Debate Surrounding Slavery in Nineteenth-Century United States Politics

Haoyu Wang[1] and Lee Tomlinson[#]

[1]Carmel High School, USA
[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century United States politics was primarily marked by the intense political debates surrounding the institution of slavery. Previous researchers mainly focused on the rhetoric employed by abolitionists but not the role of rhetoric in the arguments of all positions in the slavery debate, sparking the goal of this research study: *What rhetoric did all stances employ in nineteenth-century United States politics surrounding the institution of slavery?* Two research methods were incorporated to assess the research question: content analysis of primary sources, including four speeches in favor of slavery, four against it, and four neutral, to determine the prevalent themes in their discourse, and historical research to provide context and co-text for the broader dynamics of the period. Conclusions indicated that rhetoric played a pivotal role in shaping the arguments on various positions of the slavery debate and public opinion. These positions were also deeply intertwined with issues of human rights, societal structure, and the role of government. These conflicting positions ultimately contributed to the start of the American Civil War and the eventual abolition of slavery.

Introduction

American politics from the early to mid-nineteenth century was characterized by the intense debate surrounding the institution of slavery. The transatlantic slave trade, which began in the 16th century, kidnapped millions of Africans to work on plantations and other labor-intensive industries with cruel conditions in what would later be the United States (Bortolot, 2003). After the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century, revolutionary idealism inspired the American people to attempt to apply the phrase “all men are created equal” written in the Declaration of Independence to slaves (De Witte, 2020). However, the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1793 made possible a significant increase in the efficiency and productivity of cotton cultivation; as a result, the demand for free slave labor also increased, and the growth of slave labor became simultaneous with the explosion of cotton as a result (Tompkins, 1940), according to demographic historian J. David Hacker from the Department of History and Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, by the end of 1860, the South had become economically dependent on cotton, with approximately 3.95 million slaves living in the United States compared to the beginning of the century, when the slave population was 908,036 (Hacker, 2020).

Most slaveholders during this time were small farmers who worked to harvest cotton along with their slaves; they lived modestly and had one or two slaves. The rest came from the planter class in the Southern United States, consisting of around 1700 families that each owned more than one hundred slaves. Despite being minor in number, they were influential in politics and fervently supported slavery with their rhetoric, which they had economically relied on for the past hundred years (Thompson, 1940).

Most Southerners did not own slaves. Despite this, they, too, vigorously defended slavery, hoping to one day own a slave as a symbol of status. The existing racial hierarchy also kept them invested, as even the crudest whites stood above the enslaved.

Meanwhile, the Northern United States, where the soil was less suitable for mass agriculture, was characterized by its rapid industrialization during the Antebellum Period. As a result, the Northerners were not so determined by slavery economically, but they also did not oppose its existence in the South. The most outspoken group of abolitionists who wanted to abolish slavery entirely were the runaway slaves from the South and free African Americans; they were the groups who had suffered the most under slavery. They frequently testified to the horrid and cruel nature of slavery and their potential once free, embracing radical tactics for the immediate emancipation of all slaves.

Despite the North's economic independence from slavery, many whites, including white abolitionists, viewed free blacks as inferior. Therefore, Black abolitionists employed their rhetoric against slaveholders and the rest of the abolitionist movement (Wilson, n.d.).

Among the contentious debates surrounding slavery was an additional third party — the neutralists. They adopted a stance of neutrality and nonalignment regarding the issue of slavery, often attempting to navigate its complexities while also avoiding the polarized positions of abolitionists and prov-slavery supporters. Neutralist rhetoric advocated for measures that could gradually mitigate the abuses of slavery without offending the interests of either side; they expressed sympathy for the plight of slaves yet stopped short of fully endorsing abolitionist demands or challenging the institution of slavery, frequently serving as compromisers in the situation (Van Deburg, 1970).

Literature Review

According to communication scholar and rhetorical history expert David Zarefsky, in this debate, politicians with opposing viewpoints, such as Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, "tried to reach and persuade audiences that had their own predispositions and concerns… used argumentation in a pragmatic way; and, while shaping their views to the audience, modified the audiences' view of itself and the issues" (Zarefsky, 1992). Zarefsky further stated that both sides did not directly argue the matter of slavery, instead transforming it into a series of arguments on related topics that aimed to either abolish or nationalize slavery, interpret the legal and constitutional status of slavery, and elucidate the founding fathers' attitudes on slavery. This is essential in understanding how all politicians from all stances tailor their arguments to appeal to their listeners.

Zarefsky's statements are supported by the research of Glen McClish, the Chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, who, in his research examining the rhetoric of African American abolitionist James Forten (1766-1842), stated that: "Forten and his colleagues consistently seek to establish strong emotional bonds between white readers and the African Americans… Over time, they deemphasize the role of pity and center on more forceful, vehement appeals, shifting from emotions that heighten the vulnerability of African Americans to those suggesting strength and confidence… In addition, Forten's efforts to persuade white audiences consistently feature legal, political, and patriotic arguments based on secular Anglo-American traditions and values" (McClish, 2007). Forten's unique approach to anti-slavery rhetoric allowed him to mobilize support from a broader segment of the public by framing the struggle against slavery as a battle for the soul of the nation and communicating to them as equals.

Existing research highlights a notable gap in scholarly understanding of rhetorical strategies in nineteenth-century American politics surrounding slavery. While there are insights into rhetorical strategies employed by prominent individuals, a detailed analysis of rhetoric used by all three stances in this debate is lacking. This leads to the research question: *What rhetoric did all stances employ in nineteenth-century United States politics surrounding the institution of slavery?*

The known aspects include the rhetorical devices and appeal to morality, traditions, economic interests, national unity, and emotion by abolitionists and neutralists in the slavery debate. However, the unknown lingers in the regional variations in how pro-slavery factions employed these strategies and the frequency of their usage. By

discerning how all positions used rhetoric to defend their arguments in this debate, scholars can gain valuable insights into the political and social complexities of this critical period in American history and the power of rhetoric in mobilizing and influencing people. Exploring this gap contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the echoes of these nineteenth-century debates that reverberate in contemporary society.

Methods

This research study explores the rhetoric employed by all stances on the debate regarding slavery in early to mid-nineteenth-century American politics and their frequencies. The results are significant because they contribute to a deeper understanding of the importance of ethical communication, critical thinking, and civic engagement in addressing divisive issues and promoting social progress.

This research employed historical analysis to investigate the research question, allowing for the in-depth study of primary sources from the period to understand all side's rhetorical strategies and their frequencies. It meticulously analyzed 12 primary sources, four from each stance: Pro-slavery, anti-slavery, and neutralist, as identified by previous research, to uncover the persuasive strategy and ideological clashes derived from the rhetorical discourse on slavery. The study utilized content analysis methods to examine a comprehensive range of documents representing the political discourse on slavery during this period. Key variables included the rhetorical strategies employed in various perspectives. The early to mid-nineteenth century was selected as the focus of this research due to the vast availability of primary sources due to the intensification of the debate, making the rhetoric employed during this time particularly worthy of study. The paper categorized the 12 sources below into three categories:

Pro-slavery sources:

- "The Pro-Slavery Argument" by Thomas R. Dew (1832)
- "Speech Before the Senate, March 4, 1850" by John C. Calhoun (1850)
- "Mudsill" Speech by James Henry Hammond (1858)
- "Cornerstone" Speech by Alexander Stephens (1861)

Anti-slavery sources:

- "Declaration of Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society" by William Lloyd Garrison (1833)
- "Higher Law" Speech by William Henry Seward (1850)
- "Ain't I a Woman?" by Sojourner Truth (1851)
- "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" by Frederick Douglass (1852)

Neutralist sources:

- "1850 Compromise Speech" by Henry Clay (1850)
- "Seventh of March" by Daniel Webster (1850)
- "Homecoming" Speech by Stephen Douglas (1858)
- "House Divided" Speech by Abraham Lincoln (1858)

This research selected 12 speeches to fit several criteria for a comprehensive and representative sample; they were:

- Diversity of perspectives: The research included works from all three viewpoints to ensure the analysis captured the full spectrum of rhetoric in the slavery debate.
- Prominence and influence: It selected speeches that were widely influential in their time as they are likely to have significantly impacted public opinion and policy decisions.
- Historical context: It chose speeches that represent critical moments and events in the history of the slavery debate to ensure the analysis is grounded in the period's historical context.
- Accessibility: It analyzed speeches that were accessible online for free via a Google search.

- Balance: Four speeches were included for each stance, striving for a balanced representation of different perspectives. This helps ensure that the analysis is fair and comprehensive.

An initial exploratory phase of the research involved familiarizing oneself with primary sources, identifying key themes, and developing a preliminary coding scheme for rhetorical elements. A focused coding phase followed, systematically applying the coding scheme to categorize content based on rhetorical strategies. Qualitative content analysis was the primary method for analyzing and explaining the impact of rhetoric. This involved identifying recurrent themes, examining rhetorical devices, and understanding the persuasive strategies used in the political discourse on slavery. A data tracking sheet assessed and organized the frequency of specific rhetorical framing by sentence; it was divided into five categories regarding the discussion of slavery from a moral, social, historical, economic, legal, political, and religious perspective. Sentences that did not apply to these categories were labeled "other."

Potential ethical concerns of this research include the use of offensive language in specific rhetorical situations. However, it is important to note that it is essential to this analysis. A trigger warning was used before each section containing such language, with the option to skip or approach the material cautiously.

This research methodology aims to provide a comprehensive and replicable analysis of rhetoric used by all factions in the slavery debate in early—to mid-nineteenth-century American politics. The chosen methods ensure a thorough analysis while addressing potential ethical concerns.

Results and Analysis

This research study meticulously explores the rhetoric employed by all stances on the debate regarding slavery in early to mid-nineteenth-century American politics and their frequencies using historical and content analysis. The findings are significant for raising awareness of the complexities of history and the enduring legacy of slavery in modern society.

Frequency Of Various Rhetorical Framing

According to the data results from content analysis in Table 1, pro-slavery speeches had 208 sentences in total. The following was revealed about the rhetorical framing employed: 26 sentences were moral, 16 were historical, 28 were social, 19 were legal, 80 were political, 25 were religious, 4 were economic, and 10 were uncategorized.

As for anti-slavery speeches, they had a total of 268 sentences, of which 29 were moral, 20 were historical, 46 were social, 39 were legal, 38 were political, 67 were religious, 0 were economic, and 29 were uncategorized.

Neutralist speeches contained 342 sentences, of which 2 were moral, 60 were historical, 27 were social, 50 were legal, 180 were political, 5 were religious, 0 were economic, and 18 were uncategorized.

Table 1. Number of sentences coded for rhetorical framing

Speech	Moral	Historical	Social	Legal	Political	Religious	Economic	Other
Dew	15	6	5	1	0	19	0	1
Calhoun	2	0	0	0	39	0	0	2

Hammond	3	0	14	2	6	1	4	2
Stephens	6	10	9	16	35	5	0	5
Garrison	16	8	0	12	7	9	0	3
Seward	1	5	1	9	14	3	0	2
Truth	2	0	12	0	1	7	0	2
Douglass	10	7	33	18	16	48	0	22
Clay	0	0	0	3	31	0	0	1
Webster	2	13	27	17	92	5	0	14
Douglas	0	15	0	14	35	0	0	1
Lincoln	0	32	0	16	22	0	0	2

These statistics are further indicated in the following data table that demonstrates the percentages of various rhetorical framing in all three perspectives of the debate surrounding slavery:

Table 2. Percentages of various rhetorical framing in all stances

Stance	**Moral**	**Historical**	**Social**	**Legal**	**Political**	**Religious**	**Economic**	**Other**
Pro-slavery	12.50%	7.69%	13.46%	9.13%	38.46%	12.02%	1.92%	4.81%
Anti-slavery	10.82%	7.46%	17.16%	14.55%	14.18%	25%	0%	10.82%
Neutral	0.59%	17.50%	7.89%	14.62%	52.63%	1.46%	0%	5.26%

The data above shows that the most prominent rhetorical framings in both pro-slavery and neutral arguments were political, with anti-slavery rhetorical framing employing significant religious rhetorical framing in their claims. Surprisingly, pro-slavery arguments barely referenced an economic rhetorical framing, while anti-slavery and neutral arguments did not include any mentions of economics at all.

Pro-Slavery Arguments

Trigger Warning: This Section Contains Descriptions of Racist Language. Reader Discretion Is Advised

Content analysis of sources and further historical analysis of the era indicated that pro-slavery rhetoric frequently invoked racist ideologies and beliefs to uphold and defend the institution of slavery. Southern politicians such as

Hammond and Stephens promoted the belief of white racial superiority and black racial inferiority, dehumanizing slaves as intellectually and morally inferior beasts; they argued that Southern society required slavery to maintain social order and stability. Public intellectuals such as Dew also included many religious and moral arguments, saying that God did not punish the ancient Israelites for enslaving people and portraying slavery as a benevolent institution where masters had a duty to care for the spiritual and physical well-being of their slaves and that slaves rejoiced upon the sight of seeing them. Dew further argued that famous spiritual figures in the Bible, such as Abraham, enslaved people in the sight of God. South Carolina Senator Calhoun added to the argument by stating that the North was coercing the South into submitting and resigning its efforts to expand slavery into newly acquired territory and that the South deserved to preserve slavery.

Anti-Slavery Arguments

Anti-slavery rhetoric often highlighted the suffering and exploitation endured by those who were enslaved, as well as society's prejudices towards free blacks, with notable figures being African American abolitionists Douglass and Truth. White abolitionists such as Garrison appealed for immediate and unconditional emancipation via his strong moral language and religious imagery to condemn slavery as an abomination to God's law and the Constitution. New York Senator Seward argued that legislators ought to obey God's moral law and man's mundane law, pointing to an even "higher law" than the United States Constitution that had the ultimate say on the illegitimacy of slavery.

Neutral Arguments

Neutralist rhetoric emerged as a third ideological stance that sought to navigate a middle ground or avoid taking a clear position on the issue of slavery. Politicians like Clay, known as the "great compromiser," urged that the North and South both make concessions and that the North partially yield by enacting a stricter law that promised to return escaped slaves in the North back to the South. Webster elaborated upon and emphasized the necessity of preserving the Union above all else and the dangerous consequences of secession. Douglas' speech called for the legality of slavery and the extent to which other races could enjoy rights in a territory to be determined by the white men in that area via popular sovereignty, and Lincoln urged Congress to take immediate action to solve the adverse effects of slavery.

Conclusion

This research study investigated the question: *What rhetoric did all stances employ in nineteenth-century United States politics surrounding the institution of slavery?* This question is significant for understanding and acknowledging the enduring legacy of slavery in contemporary times. It will also contribute to a broader understanding of the political landscape of nineteenth-century United States.

In the nineteenth century, there were tremendous tensions between the States without slavery in the North and slave States in the South. This led to several arguments regarding slavery—whether in support, against, or neutral.

Those who favored slavery championed racist ideologies, asserting the inherent superiority of whites over slaves in their rhetoric. They further debated the social and political necessity for slavery in the South, citing biblical passages that purportedly sanctioned the ownership of slaves.

On the other hand, anti-slavery rhetoric condemned slavery as a moral evil and a violation of fundamental human rights granted by God and written in the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution; they also emphasized the suffering slaves endured both in the North and South.

Neutralists advocated for concessions by both slavery supporters and abolitionists. Politicians in the United States government often made compromises that would attempt to address the concerns of both factions without the

risk of sectional conflict; they also argued for pragmatic solutions to the slavery issue, prioritizing unity above anything else.

In conclusion, all stances regarding the institution of slavery employed various rhetoric in their arguments as a tool for persuasion, mobilization, and more, with a focus on political rhetorical framing for pro-slavery and neutralists. In contrast, anti-slavery rhetoric used social framing the most. These strategic deployments of rhetoric helped shape the course of American history in the following decades, leading the nation towards a gruesome Civil War in 1861 and the eventual abolishment of slavery in 1865.

Limitations

While exploring the rhetoric that various stances employed in the debate around slavery have yielded valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations in this study as a means of ensuring transparency, validity, and ethicality:

1. Although selected to be as representative and comprehensive as possible with various criteria, the sample size used for content analysis in this study remains limited. It may not accurately represent the political landscape in America during the early-to-mid-nineteenth century.
2. Due to the shortage of time, the scope of this study has been limited to speeches only, overlooking other forms of communication that individuals might have employed to persuade others and mobilize support.

For future research, it is possible to avoid these limitations by expanding the range and type of primary sources used for analysis to include more speeches and other forms of communication used during the time to achieve a more advanced understanding of the discourse surrounding slavery.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the Cambridge Centre for International Research faculty for their support throughout the research process.

References

Bortolot, A. I. (2003). The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Essay: The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Heilbrunn timeline of art history. Retrieved from http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/slav/hd_slav.htm

De Witte, M. (2020). When Thomas Jefferson penned ‘all men are created equal,’ he did not mean individual equality, says Stanford scholar. Retrieved from https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2020/07/meaning-declaration-independence-changed-time

Hacker, J. D. (2020). From ‘20. and odd’ to 10 million: The growth of the slave population in the United States. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7716878/. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1755502

McClish, G. (2007). A Man of Feeling, A Man of Colour: James Forten and the Rise of African American Deliberative Rhetoric. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rh.2007.25.3.297. https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2007.25.3.297

Thompson, E. (1940). The Planter in the Pattern of Race Relations in the South. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planter_class. https://doi.org/10.2307/2571306

Tompkins, D. (1903). The Cotton Industry. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/2999867

Van Deburg, W. (1970). Henry Clay, the Right of Petition, and Slavery in the Nation's Capital. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/23377255

Wilson, K. (n.d.). Abolitionist Rhetoric. Retrieved from books.google.com/books?id=eslMAgAAQBAJ&dq=black%2Babolitionist%2Brhetoric%2Bencyclopedia&pg=PA8#v=onepage&q=black%20abolitionist%20rhetoric%20encyclopedia&f=false

Zarefsky, D. (1992). Review: Rhetoric and Deliberation in the Debate over Slavery. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/1407499