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William Lloyd Garrison and the Crisis of Nonresistance

Lawrence R. Jannuzzi

Although the Boston waterfront had certainly seen more than its share of political rallies by 1835, trouble could have been expected when the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society scheduled a meeting for Faneuil Hall in October of that year. Boston was a town increasingly populated by working-class immigrants, with little natural affinity for activist women, and who saw in the free Blacks only competition for their own jobs. So an organization which was both female and antislavery would not have been popular in certain circles. Nevertheless, the Society promised several prominent speakers for the occasion, including the famous British abolitionist, George Thompson, and the local anti-slavery leader, William Lloyd Garrison.

The predictable trouble arrived on that day, with an angry crowd determined to break up the meeting. Years later, Garrison's children recounted the harrowing story, undoubtedly as their father had told it to them: The crowd, growing as it raged from about one hundred to "thousands," broke angrily into the assembly and searched first for Thompson, who was not yet present. Unsatisfied, the crowd then sent up the shout to "lynch Garrison."¹

1. Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told By His Children (New York, 1885), II: 12-13. This work has been accused by one historian of being "a legal brief filed for posterity in behalf of William Lloyd Garrison." See Russel B. Nye, William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers (Boston, 1955), p. 207, and its interpretations must be accepted advisedly, if at all. Nevertheless, as Nye correctly notes, it is a valuable resource of various primary materials. And it is certainly

As the story went, Garrison — a pacifist as well as an opponent of slavery — did not resist. But when a companion proposed to defend himself by force, and thus "henceforth repudiate the principle of nonresistance," Garrison, never in the habit of repudiating anything, would have none of it. Putting his hand reassuringly on the shoulder of his frightened colleague, Garrison gave him some advice:

Hold, my dear brother. . . . This is the trial of our faith and the test of our endurance. . . . Shall we give blow for blow and array sword against sword? God forbid! I will perish sooner than raise my hand against any man, even in self-defense. . . .²

Thereupon, he and his friend "calmly" retreated out a third-story window, dropping onto a shed and into an alley, and then into a nearby shop. The crowd caught him there.³

Within twenty-five years of his narrow escape from that Boston mob, however, Garrison would not only accept the fact of civil war, but would criticize President Abraham Lincoln for failing to prosecute it more vigorously. As war, the ultimate violent response, came to appear to be the only path to the abolition of slavery, Garrison not only came to accept it, but to call for it. The "nonresistant," who claimed never to "array sword against sword," even for his own life, could pass the death sentence on every Confederate, in the cause of freedom.

Nevertheless, until the day he died, Garrison refused to admit any inconsistency, much less any change, in his thinking. Struggling to preserve both pacifism and abolitionism, and insisting that his position was consistent, Garrison would come to

helpful in any discussion of how Garrison's children wanted their father to be remembered.

2. *Ibid.*, II: 18.

3. *Ibid.* The story of Garrison's calm courage need not be taken at face value. One report had it that Garrison was rescued by "an enormous truckman of the name of Aaron Cooley," who carried Garrison to safety. Another account described how a Mr. Bailey saved Garrison, who stood "with his clothes all torn off and a rope around his neck." Bailey broke one man's arm with an umbrella, in the process of rescuing Garrison. See Deborah Weston to Mary Weston, October 22, 1835, in Clare Taylor, ed., *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 45. It appears that later in his life, Garrison forgot that he had been saved only by a violent response.

be labelled a hypocrite and an idiot, excoriated by many of his fellow abolitionists and pacifists, as well as by generations of historians.⁴

Yet, Garrison was neither stupid nor dishonest; the problem for him was precisely the opposite. He could never simply choose between abolitionism and pacifism, because both were aspects of a more fundamental position; they were in fact implications of the same idea. The Civil War presented difficulties to him precisely because he came to see connections between his rejection of slavery and his rejection of war (and many other reforms as well). And when one called for precedence at the expense of the other — when violence seemed the only road to abolition — Garrison was not afforded the luxury of simply choosing which reform was most dear to him, for to deny one was to deny the source of all.

To appreciate the crisis of conscience precipitated by the Civil War, it is necessary first to examine the political and, most of all, the religious foundation on which Garrison built both his pacifism and his abolitionism. An understanding of the painful process by which Garrison dismantled one, for the sake of the other, all the while arguing that he was doing no such thing, reveals how deeply his ideas ran, how sincerely they were believed, and yet how completely they were to be orphaned.

Garrison had turned his attention to pacifism or, more precisely, to the question of the justifiability of national wars, as early as the late 1820s. Although this was a time of relative peace, both domestically and internationally, it is a mark of Garrison's wide-ranging interests and his boundless passion that he should devote so much thought, as well as space in his newspaper, to it. And for Garrison, if a matter was worthy of thought, it was also worthy of his fervid enthusiasm.

Although he termed the debate over the justifiability of war the "peace question," he had little patience with those who suggested that peace was a question, that war and peace were matters open for debate. For him, there was no "question" when it came to peace. Those who argued the finer points of the "theory" of war, according to Garrison, strained at gnats and swallowed camels: war was "not an abstraction . . . but as tangible as bombs, cannon, mangled corpses, smouldering ruins, desolated towns and

4. See for example William Birney, James G. Birney and His Times (New York, 1890).

villages, rivers of blood." Why debate the theory of war, he asked, "when we could judge of it by its fruits?"⁵

Gradually, Garrison came more often to consider the question of personal abstention from violence as a corollary of his rejection of war. He claimed that history was "crowded with evidence" that individual violence had never solved a human problem, had never alleviated an inequitable situation, had never visibly improved or uplifted any of the participants.⁶ Noble though a warrior's motives might be, Garrison argued with his typical vehemence, the deadly circle was unbreakable, and the results were always the same: "crime, misery, revenge, murder, and everything abominable and bloody."⁷

For Garrison, the only escape from this trap of personal and collective violence was to be found in Christianity. Certainly, Garrison believed, the Gospel left no margin for argument among Christians. The injunction of Christ was clear, the duty of his followers unambiguous.

When he said: "Fear not those who kill the body," he broke every deadly weapon. When he said: "My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight that I should be delivered to the Jews," he plainly prohibits war in self-defense, and substituted martyrdom therefore. When he said "Love your enemies," he did not mean "Kill them if they go too far."⁸

This substitution of martyrdom for self-defense was both scriptural and the embodiment of "general" Christianity. For Garrison, all scriptural mandates could be reduced to Jesus' command to "resist not evil," a phrase which became the masthead for his pacifist mouthpiece, *The Non-Resistant*. He believed that this single command, for which he used the word "nonresistance," embodied the essence not only of Jesus' direct references to war,

5. Fanny Garrison Villard, ed., William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance (reprint edition, New York, 1973), p. 31.

6. The Liberator, September 29, 1838.

7. Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, I: 201.

8. The Liberator, April 4, 1856.

but of the spirit of Christianity, the "heavenly spirit of the gospel" itself.⁹

The command to "resist not evil" was more than simply turning the other cheek; it represented the perfect and total implementation of Christian (as Garrison thought of "Christian") life in both the personal and public spheres. As the nonresistants framed the idea, the most important objection to violence, even in a good cause, was *coercion*, the establishment of the will of humans over other humans, by the use of force. In Garrison's view, coercion was the antithesis of Christianity, and the duty of the pacifist, fully understood, was not merely objection to war, but objection to human coercion in whatever form it may take. This was the true meaning of "nonresistance."¹⁰

The roots of the Garrisonian vision of societal reform lay in his perception that coercion, the establishment of the will of humans over humans, was not only sinful, but the original and ultimate sin, antithetical to divine law. The point of Christianity, in its admonition to "resist not evil" was the elimination of human force on earth and the establishment of absolute equality of humanity under God.¹¹

Garrison expectantly awaited Christ's imminent return to earth; the millennium or thousand-year rule would mark the end of history and the triumph of justice and peace in this world.¹² Although it was by no means clear to Garrison precisely what the millennium would bring or how one might prepare for it, he assumed, in Lewis Perry's words, that "the period before the millennium must be characterized by a great rise in piety and moral conduct and that perhaps in such a period, America might be assigned a special destiny in the progress of civilization." Moreover, it was the special task of the Christian to prepare the

9. Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, I: 201.

10. David Lawson, "Swords into Plowshares: the Intellectual Foundations of the first American Peace Movement, 1815-1865" (M.A. thesis, University of New Mexico, 1975), p. 81. Lawson offers these same three elements: war's pragmatic evil, its antisciptural nature, and its opposition to "general" Christianity, as the common sources for all of the antebellum peace movements.

11. Lewis Perry, Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought (Ithaca, New York, 1973), pp. 56-59.

12. Alan Simpson, Puritanism in Old and New England (Chicago, 1955), pp. 42 and 75-79.

world for the triumphant return. Garrison believed that the Christian, especially the active Christian participating in reform movements, was ordained by God as a special tool for the purification of humanity in anticipation of God's kingdom.¹³

Purifying the world for the millennium was not a metaphorical task to Garrison; implicit in reform theology was the assumption that humanity could in fact be made perfect.¹⁴ The idea that people could and should immediately and completely be freed from sin appealed to Garrison's sense of urgency and harmonized with his uncompromising views of personal morality. The fierce inflexibility and impatience in abolition, for which Garrison is largely remembered, thus found its roots in Garrison's religion.¹⁵

The attainable perfect holiness which was to precede the reign of God in the millennium was part of salvation ordained by God, and was possible as long as mankind did not interfere with God's work. God, as a "present sovereign," worked in the "ordinary events of History," and humanity's relation to Him was immediate, that is without the need for mediation. All institutions that claimed to mediate between humans and God were suspect because they interfered with the perfect relationship God meant to establish with each individual.¹⁶ It was a short and easy step to conclude that all intermediary institutions were not only unnecessary, but in fact obstructive.

"What institutions among men necessarily tend to subject man to the will of man?" asked Henry C. Wright, a nonresistant whose views were perhaps closer to Garrison's than anyone else's. "Whatever they might be, it was considered unanimously [by the nonresistants] that they were *malum in se* . . ." The nonresistants had examined slavery, civil government, the church, the "domestic institution," and the school system, and found that all, to some extent, tended to "enslave the mind . . . crush the soul and subject

13. Perry, Radical Abolitionism, p. 37; The Liberator, December 15, 1837.

14. The Liberator, October 15, 1841.

15. Truman Nelson, ed., Documents of Upheaval: Selections from William Lloyd Garrison's The Liberator, 1831-1865 (New York, 1966); see also Russel B. Nye, William Lloyd Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers (Boston, 1955), p. 26, and John L. Thomas, The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison (Boston, 1963), pp. 121-135.

16. Perry, Radical Abolitionism, pp. 34-35.

it to man." All institutions had the potential for coercion, the possibility that they would cease to be merely superfluous and begin actively to interfere with God's work. Any human who set herself or himself in a position of authority in effect usurped the authority of God.¹⁷

In this way, immediatism, the direct and potentially perfect relationship between each individual human and God, as a preliminary step toward the millennium, may be seen as a variety of antinomianism, or the rejection of socially established morality. If each individual was entitled to a relationship with God that was not mediated by any human or a human institution, all human laws are rendered suspect, at best.

The Garrisonian nonresistants drew these various themes of millennialism, perfectionism, and antinomianism into a neat reform ideology. The perfection of the human race, or as Garrison called it, "universal emancipation from sin,"¹⁸ of which pacifism was one aspect, was both possible and necessary. In perfecting and preparing the earth for the rule of Christ — the millennium — it was first necessary for individuals to become perfect, a task impeded by all coercive institutions purporting to mediate between the individual and God. Thus, coercion became for the nonresistants the most basic, the most widespread, and the most insidious of sins.

The crusade against human coercion could and would be invoked not just against national wars, but wherever "force" played a role in society.¹⁹ Garrison's nonresistance — the fight against coercion — provided the unifying principle for a multitude of reforms. All his reform interests merged and found a common rationale in it, and "universal emancipation" from coercion became a link for movements thought of by most reformers as discrete and diverse. Garrison had always seen the various reforms as connected in at least a general way. Early in his career, as editor of *The Journal of the Times*, during the mid-1820s, he had identified "three objects" of his life, "namely the suppression of intemperance . . . the gradual emancipation of every slave in the

17. Henry C. Wright to The Liberator, July 21, 1837.

18. The Liberator, December 15, 1837.

19. Perry, Radical Abolitionism, p. 59.

republic, and the perpetuity of National peace."²⁰ In these early expressions, however, reforms had never been connected more explicitly than by the common imagery Garrison loved to apply to them. He was fond, for example, of calling liquor a "tyrant," and its victims "slaves."²¹

As Garrison's thought developed, however, his vehemence increased and his reform urges grew broader. Where he had once championed "gradual emancipation," he had already decided by 1829 that "to hold them [the slaves] longer in bondage . . . [would be] tyrannical. . . ."²² Where before he had been concerned mainly about "national peace," by 1838 he would write sweepingly about the "inviolability of human life."²³ He became more and more convinced of his mission, and nonresistance gave vent to his growing zeal and his increasing sense of urgency. Nonresistance allowed Garrison to focus his reform urges and release their increased energy.

By the late 1830s, then, nonresistance had come to full flower, and Garrison was able to make his most forceful statement concerning the breadth and unity of his reforms:

Another motto we have chosen is UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION Henceforth we shall use it in the widest latitude: the emancipation of our whole race from the dominion of man, from the thralldom of self, from the government of brute force, from the bondage of sin — and bringing them under the dominion of God, the control of an inward spirit, the government of the law of love, and into the obedience and liberty of Christ.²⁴

20. Journal of the Times, October 3, 1828, quoted in Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, I: 103.

21. The Liberator, December 22, 1832.

22. Genius of Universal Emancipation, September 2, 1829, quoted in Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, I: 142.

23. Garrison to Samuel J. May, September 8, 1838, in Louis Ruchames and Walter M. Merrill, eds., The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison (Cambridge, 1971), II: 390-391.

24. The Liberator, December 15, 1837.

Seeing that nonresistance had ramifications well beyond mere pacifism, Garrison was eager to give those implications voice. So under his leadership, in September of 1839, about two hundred "peace men," a large proportion of whom were actually peace women, organized themselves into the New England Non-Resistant Society. The first order of business for Garrison was ensuring that this group would exist quite distinctly from any mere peace or antislavery organization. The ensuing power struggle alienated about eighty percent of the membership, but left Garrison as the undisputed leader of the remainder. The faithful remnant immediately commissioned Garrison to compose a "Declaration of Sentiments" outlining the goals and ideals of the group. He undertook the task with characteristic zeal, producing a finished copy in a single day.²⁵ It is clear that Garrison had more on his mind than just pacifism.

He opened the assault with a broadside: "We cannot acknowledge allegiance to any human government," he bluntly stated. But he just as quickly assured his readers that this was not to be a revolutionary society in the usual sense of the word. If the object of the nonresistants was to avoid all sin, the means would have to be as pure as the ends. They could not, therefore, "oppose any . . . government by a resort to physical force" themselves.²⁶ To engage in force would be to perpetuate the very coercion they despised, an effort that must ultimately fail. Only perfect Christianity, that is, the "nonresistant principle," held any hope, and would "ensure all things needful to us . . . and must ultimately triumph over every assailing force."²⁷ The "non-resistant principle" manifested itself in several ways. There was, of course, the espousal of pacifism, the rejection of "all wars, whether offensive or defensive," along with all their trappings, or preparations, or anything surrounding war with the illusion of glory. As for the nonresistants themselves, it was not only impermissible to fight, but also "to bear arms or to hold a military office."²⁸

25. Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, September 21, 1838, in Ruchames and Merrill, Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, II: 390-391.

26. The Liberator, September 28, 1838.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

Garrison reserved the same fate for "all existing civil, political, legal, and ecclesiastical institutions" Finding it impossible to give allegiance to any coercive human institutions, he was "bound by a kingdom which is not of this world, . . . which has no state lines, no national partitions, no geographical boundaries, in which there is no distinction of rank, or division of caste, or inequality of sex. . . ." ²⁹ The citizenry of this Government of God was to be the justified Christians, the regenerate, the elect, he had said earlier, and "without are dogs and sorcerers and whoremongers."³⁰

In striving to establish this divine, peaceful kingdom, the concept of nationhood, and therefore of patriotism, became obsolete. Garrison loved the United States of America, "only as he loved all other lands." All governments, anywhere in the world, in whatever form they took, "whether they are called despotism, monarchical, or republican," were equally obstructive of God's will and counter to divine law.³¹ "It cannot be affirmed," he wrote, "that the POWERS THAT BE, in any nation, are actuated by the spirit or guided by the example of Christ, in the treatment of enemies; therefore, they cannot be agreeable to the will of God; and therefore, their overthrow by a spiritual regeneration of their subjects is inevitable."³²

Yet, the question of the relationship of the nonresistant to existing governments remained. Since physical force upheld governments "at the point of a bayonet," Garrison wrote, it was difficult to see how a Christian could coexist with the mechanism of coercion and remain untainted by its sin. Holding "any office which imposes . . . the obligation to compel men to do right," was rejected immediately. This was just as quickly extended to "every legislative and judicial body . . . worldly honors, and stations of authority." Furthermore, Garrison included voting as unlawful participation, for "If *we* cannot occupy a seat in the legislature," he reasoned, ". . . neither can we elect *others* to act as our

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., December 15, 1837.

31. Ibid., September 28, 1838.

32. Ibid.

substitutes in any such capacity." The entire legal system, both civil and criminal, was likewise to be shunned.³³

Garrison, however, hastened to offer outsiders the (somewhat hollow) assurance that he and the nonresistants were not "Jacobins," not advocates of disorder or anarchy. In the first place, he did not propose that all governments be abolished, but merely all *human* governments. Human governments were the true anarchists because it was they that "array themselves against the peaceful dominion of the SON OF GOD on earth," thus coming between humanity and true government.³⁴

How, then, were the nonresistants to proceed? Protestations of meek submission to the law notwithstanding, Garrison demanded action and expected constant activism. "Non-resistance is not a state of passivity," he later reminded his readers. "On the contrary it is a state of activity, ever fighting the good fight of faith . . ."³⁵ The work was to move forward through the traditional channel of evangelical reformers — the only path available to an antinomianist — spiritual regeneration by conversion. They expected, therefore, to succeed "through THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING constantly laying their case before the world until such day as God would allow their testimony to fall upon fertile soil."³⁶

Along with warfare and human governments, the most obvious target of the foolishness of preaching was, of course, chattel slavery.³⁷ But Garrison, in the words of one correspondent with *The Liberator*, was "not only breaking the chains of the black slave but also of the *white* slave."³⁸ The white slaves most in evidence, as it turned out, were women. "As our object is *universal* Emancipation," he wrote, "we shall go for the RIGHT OF WOMEN to their utmost extent." Patriarchal families were commonly ruled by men with pretensions of authority over their

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.; Perry, Radical Abolitionism, pp. 57-58. See also The Liberator, May 31, 1844.

35. Garrison, On Non-Resistance, p. 30.

36. The Liberator, September 28, 1838.

37. Ibid., December 15, 1837.

38. Ibid., February 26, 1831.

wives and children, men as guilty of coercion, therefore, as any invading soldier, lawmaker, or overseer.³⁹

In time, Garrison would also espouse the cause of the Native American, join in the fight to eliminate capital punishment, and condemn lotteries, debtors' prisons, and tobacco, all in the name of nonresistance.⁴⁰ Considering the scriptural roots of nonresistance, the most surprising entry on the list of coercive institutions was organized religion itself. Organized churches, through their legal sanctions, their dogmatic pronouncements, their hollow forms and rituals, and in many cases their apparent alliance with slavery, easily rivaled the civil governments in their obstruction of God's salvation. Religion, in fact, was a main target of nonresistance, even more central than government in the attack.⁴¹ "O, the rottenness of Christendom," Garrison moaned.⁴²

Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, the nonresistants soon extended their condemnation of the churches to the common source of authority for both the churches and nonresistance itself, the scriptures. In his earlier days, Garrison had acknowledged his debt to the scriptures, and the reliance of nonresistance upon them. But by 1845, he had decided that "to say everything contained within the lids of the Bible is divinely inspired, and to insist upon the dogma as fundamentally important is to give utterance to a bold fiction. . . . To say that everything in the Bible is to be believed . . . is equally absurd."⁴³ This is a

39. *Ibid.*, December 15, 1837. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between abolition and early feminism, see Aileen Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850 (New York, 1967), pp. 39-77.

40. Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, I: 84 and 268-270; The Liberator, October 3, 1845.

41. The Liberator, August 20, 1836; James G. Birney, A Letter On The Political Obligations of Abolitionists, with a Reply by William Lloyd Garrison (Boston, 1839), p. 35; see also Kraditor, Means and Ends, pp. 78-117; and Madeleine H. Rice, American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy (Gloucester, Mass., 1964).

42. Garrison to Samuel J. May, September 23, 1836, in Ruchames and Merrill, Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, II: 178.

43. The Liberator, November 21, 1845.

profound statement for one so thoroughly grounded in Massachusetts Congregationalism.

Garrison never questioned the ultimate authority of God, but he considered scripture mediated by the very fact of human participation in authorship. Scripture was "a potent weapon . . . in the hands of time serving commentators and designing priests," rather than a source of communion with the divine; as such, it became part of the mechanism of coercion, used to "beat down the rising spirit of religious liberty, and to discourage scientific development."⁴⁴

It was perhaps the greatest of many ironies of Garrison's career that the following decades would force him to choose between his reforms, and doing so would shatter the unifying principle upon which they all were pinned. In 1837, two years before Garrison's Declaration of Principles, dark clouds had begun to gather on the horizon for the nonresistants. One of the faithful, Elijah P. Lovejoy, published a nonresistant newspaper in Alton, Illinois. Three times he had built and opened his small shop, and three times he had seen it destroyed by pro-slavery mobs. In 1837, Lovejoy stood by his fourth shop and saw the mob approaching once more. Rather than see his press destroyed yet again, Lovejoy armed himself and was gunned down by the crowd.⁴⁵

To the nonresistants who viewed nonviolence not only as the end to violence but also the best defense against it, the act should have been an unqualified defeat, and the fact that a prominent nonresistant had died violently did indeed send reverberations through the reform community. Lovejoy's death made him an immediate and unqualified martyr for the non-Garrisonian abolitionists.⁴⁶ The nonresistants, however, were reduced to agonizing over how to treat such an event. Garrison was grudgingly forced to admire Lovejoy's courage and respect his spirit, even while recognizing that Lovejoy's actions constituted a breach of faith. Lovejoy was "a martyr," Garrison conceded, but not a Christian martyr. Nonresistance itself had not failed, Garrison maintained, only Lovejoy had: "As abolitionists, we are

44. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1853.

45. Thomas, *The Liberator*, p. 256; Nye, *Garrison and the Humanitarian Reformers*, p. 101.

46. *Ibid.*

constrained to believe that if the doctrine of nonresistance had been practically carried out by our brethren in Alton . . . a . . . deliverance and victory would have been the result." Lovejoy had practiced perfect nonresistance three times and had survived. Abandoning it, he had died. Even if he had remained a confirmed nonresistant and still been killed, Garrison implied, his martyrdom would have been of a more pure type, and "a more thrilling and abiding effect" would have been achieved.⁴⁷

As the 1840s and 1850s passed, however, the perceived defeats of nonresistance mounted, and for nonresistants in general and Garrison in particular, faith was more and more replaced by despair that any "thrilling and abiding effect" would ever be forthcoming. By the late 1840s, Garrison could look back at what seemed to him an unbroken series of victories for the "slave oligarchy," as he termed the South: the division of Virginia into two slave states, the admission of Louisiana as a slave state, the War of 1812, the Missouri Compromise, the Seminole War in Florida, the nullification controversy, the annexation of Texas, and the war with Mexico all seemed to Garrison as bitter defeats — many for abolition, all for nonresistance.⁴⁸

The lengthening string of blows took its toll on the ranks of the nonresistants. In 1851, Garrison's close friend and colleague, Samuel J. May, helped free a young fugitive slave named Jerry from the hands of the "official kidnappers" who were enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law. For May, this law was too objectionable, even for the nonresistant. "Perhaps you think I go too far," he explained to Garrison, "in enjoining it upon all men to act against the Fugitive Slave Law . . . even if it be to fight for the rescue of its victims, . . . but when I saw poor Jerry . . . I could not preach non-resistance very earnestly to the crowd who were clamoring for his release."⁴⁹ Thus, May, like Lovejoy, had abandoned nonresistance when he believed it the only way to prevent a greater evil, in this case to thwart the hated law.

In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law, and it precipitated the violent conflict known as "Bleeding Kansas." In Framingham, Massachusetts, Garrison marked the passage of the

47. The Liberator, November 24, 1837.

48. *Ibid.*, August 25, 1848.

49. Samuel J. May to Garrison, December 6, 1851, quoted in Thomas, The Liberator, p. 381.

act by burning copies of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Constitution. For many, it was the sign of final defeat for any chance of a peaceful settlement of the slavery issue. Wendell Phillips, a staunch abolitionist, though not a nonresistant, now felt unrelieved gloom over the future of abolition. "The *government* has fallen into the hands of the slave power *completely*," he wrote. "So far as national politics are concerned, we are beaten — there is no hope. Our Union, all confess, must sever finally on this question."⁵⁰

The nonresistants felt the same way. The reaction of one of the most prominent nonresistants, Gerrit Smith, to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, showed their melancholy. Smith had travelled to Washington seeking the peaceful termination of slavery; he left in the summer of 1854, "more discouraged than ever."⁵¹ By 1856, at the height of the bloodshed in Kansas, he had rejected his nonresistance outright. Even those abolitionists who accepted government but hoped for peaceful and legal reform, Smith decided, were doomed to disappointment or worse.⁵²

Garrison could hardly escape the general air of defeat pervading the abolition movement, and the resulting warlike mood began to surface in his writing. When Henry Ward Beecher led a movement in 1856 to supply Sharp's rifles to the "freesoilers" of Kansas, Garrison responded on his normal nonresistant grounds, but only perfunctorily; he proceeded to condemn Beecher's plan for entirely different reasons. Since the freesoilers did not consider themselves to be abolitionists, Garrison decided, it was debatable whether they had been acting "upon principle" at all. Furthermore, since they were not abolitionists, they had struck "a truce with slavery" in the South and were thus *de facto* pro-slavery, receiving no more than their due at the hands of the "Border Ruffians." In any case, Garrison concluded, if one were to enter the armaments business, it would be more efficient to supply the rifles directly to those most in need, the Negro slaves.⁵³

50. Wendell Phillips to Elizabeth Pease Nichol, August 7, 1854, quoted in Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, III: 411.

51. Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, III: 406.

52. The Liberator, August 8, 1856.

53. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1856.

Nonresistance, in this case, had clearly been relegated to a minor position.

His shaken faith had not recovered two years later, in 1858, when he felt compelled to qualify even the most standard appeal for peaceful means. "I will not trust the war-spirit anywhere in the Universe of God . . .," he could still write, but he was no longer sure that this was the way to ultimate freedom for the slave, for he added, "I say this not so much as an abolitionist as a man."⁵⁴ For Garrison, then, where once abolition had been part and parcel of an overarching view of the human condition, being an abolitionist was no longer synonymous with being "a man." The semantic slip gave a preview of the growing severability of what had once been aspects of a single idea.

The growing crisis was brought home forcefully in 1859, when John Brown's band of raiders invaded the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in hopes of arming the local slaves and touching off a general revolt. Brown, of course, had brought weapons for his followers and for the slaves, and intended to secure more at the federal armory there. His explicit goal was to end slavery by promoting violence, an end that Garrison the abolitionist could not help but admire, though Garrison the pacifist could not condone the means to be used.

At first, Garrison did not quite know what to make of Brown. His first notice of the action mentioned only a "misguided, wild and apparently insane . . . effort . . . to emancipate the slaves in Virginia."⁵⁵ During Brown's trial and subsequent hanging, however, Garrison reconsidered and could not find it within himself to condemn the insurrectionist. Garrison eventually published a lengthy eulogy for the executed "captain," and called for the date of his demise to be made "a day for a general public expression of sentiment."⁵⁶

A few months later, the war itself broke out. It had been supposed by some fellow nonresistants, notably Adin Ballou, that when violence eventually erupted, as had long been expected,

54. *Ibid.*, June 4, 1858.

55. *The Liberator*, October 21, 1859.

56. *Ibid.*, December 16, 1859; Garrison to Oliver Johnson, November 1, 1859, in Ruchames and Merrill, *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, IV: 661.

Garrison would be among the first to censure it.⁵⁷ Garrison, however, actually applauded the onset of the war. In *The Liberator*, he wrote "as a peace man," rejoicing "that the issue is at last made up, and that the struggle is going on."⁵⁸ At times he admitted that "the war . . . presents some paradoxical aspects," but he had come to fear peace more than he hated war. Although he always called himself a "peace man," he could actually condemn any peaceful overtures on either side, because he was afraid that they would end the war too soon, before slavery was abolished. "The spirit of 'compromise' and 'conciliation,'" he wrote near the beginning of the war, could "reduce the North to a worse submission than she has ever yet evinced," and leave the slaves in bondage.⁵⁹ Thus, the nonresistant pacifist looked at the war, and "Thanked God for it all!"⁶⁰

Garrison the abolitionist and the man, and most importantly the nonresistant, thus confronted a serious dilemma. More and more convinced that only violence could destroy slavery in America, yet unwilling to abandon his nonresistance, the fact of civil war presented an awful choice. In the end, he was forced to seek, and was able to slide through, what amounted, in Lewis Perry's words, to "intellectual loopholes," loopholes that were present in nonresistance from its inception.⁶¹

The first of these "loopholes" was located in the confusion regarding authority which arose from the nonresistant's antinomian assumptions. The rejection of coercion in every instance was tantamount to the rejection of the concept of any human authority. Governments and the slave institution were early targets; organized religion and the scriptures themselves later followed. Having removed civil and ecclesiastical government as sources of authority, Garrison was left with the vicissitudes of individual conscience alone through which to discern the will of God. If God communicated his will directly and without

 57. Merle Curti, *The American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860* (Durham, N.C., 1929), p. 87; Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, pp. 265-267.

58. *The Liberator*, May 10, 1861.

59. Garrison to James S. Gibbons, April 28, 1861, in Ruchames and Merrill, *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, V: 19-20.

60. *The Liberator*, February 7, 1862.

61. Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, p. 239.

mediation to the regenerate individual, whatever an individual perceived as the will of god would have to be accepted. In addition to fitting nicely with the idea of individual moral agency, this reliance upon conscience enabled Garrison to accept a wide latitude of behavior from others without obvious compromise of his own principles. A person need only pass the test of sincerity, of being true to his own inner light, to be judged favorably. If individuals dealt directly with God, the only question to be asked of individuals was related to their sincerity.

To Garrison, the admission of Oregon as a free state was not a victory, because President James K. Polk was only fulfilling his bargain with sin, the Missouri Compromise. Beecher's gun-running plan was similarly objectionable, chiefly because the freesoilers were not acting "upon principle." But the perfect case in point was John Brown. "Captain Brown," Garrison wrote, "sincerely believed himself to have been raised up by God to deliver the oppressed in this country in the way he had been chosen. . . . When he says he aims to be guided by the Golden Rule, it is no cant from his lips but a vital application of it to his own soul. . . ." He was, therefore, to be given in death the honor of a martyr, and to be "held in grateful and honorable remembrance."⁶² Although Brown could not be compared with Jesus, "the weapons of whose warfare were not carnal," he was certainly on a par with Moses, Joshua, Gideon, or David, or "any who ever wielded a sword in the cause of Liberty."⁶³ Even though his methods were imperfect, they were cleansed by his intentions. Thus were the warlike actions of a violent man praised on the basis of sincerity.

The "dictates of conscience" provided Garrison with his first avenue by which he was able to "thank God" for the war.⁶⁴ The cause of peace would not prevent him from choosing the side of righteousness in a struggle for liberty waged by men of good conscience. "Individual conscience" had allowed Garrison to approve of the war, and even threatened to carve a niche in nonresistance for the rightful existence of a human government.

Such an admission by itself would have been fatal to nonresistance, by definition. But Garrison simultaneously

62. *The Liberator*, October 28, 1859.

63. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1859.

64. *Ibid.*, July 12, 1861.

approached the problem of the war from an entirely different direction. Another of the implications of nonresistant perfectionism was the idea that sin was not to be tolerated in any form, and that humanity was, therefore, "necessarily" perfectible. Since sin was, in this sense, unnecessary and avoidable, association with sin in any way was for the nonresistant equivalent to its commission — to tolerate sin was to share the guilt. This principle was as true for collective organizations as it was for individuals, and it manifested itself in Garrison's growing commitment to the idea of "disunion," the idea of "no union with slaveholders." "If we continue with the South," he wrote and constantly repeated, "we are as bad as she."⁶⁵ It had become a moral imperative that the abolitionists dissociate themselves from the slavemongers. By the mid 1840s, disunionism had been officially adopted by the American, New England, and Massachusetts antislavery societies, and espoused by the Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was held in common by nonresistant and political abolitionists alike, and it complemented nonresistance.⁶⁶ It was a point upon which all could agree.

The urgent wish to dissolve the Union increased with the momentum of abolitionism, and became increasingly focused upon the Constitution. Garrison, adopting the phrase "No Union with Slaveholders" as a motto for his newspaper, loudly proclaimed that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, and as such was "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell."⁶⁷ Not only was slavery sanctioned by the Constitution, but the very Union which sprang from the Constitution nourished the slave system. Slavery was seen as the child of the Constitution, and without the protection of the Constitution, Garrison believed, slavery would perish. The North, then, was guilty by association.⁶⁸

The disunion movement in general and the attack upon the Constitution in particular, however, were made both by nonresistants and by many abolitionists in their capacities as antislave activists. Garrison's theory that the Constitution was a

65. The Liberator, October 3, 1845.

66. Garrison and Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, III: 107 and 111.

67. This phrase also appeared for years in The Liberator.

68. The Liberator, May 6, 1842.

pro-slavery document could be separated from and irrelevant to his earlier theory that the Constitution was a coercive document.⁶⁹

For an abolitionist, the disunion impulse derived not from an objection to government *per se*, but was instead a protest against a *particular* government (that embodied in the Constitution), for the sake of abolition. For a nonresistant, the disunion urge was an objection to *all* governments, by definition. Only coincidentally did the two agree upon the need for the dissolution of *this* government, the federal government, but it was a coincidence upon which Garrison was able to capitalize.

Garrison was able to judge the government as an abolitionist, find it to be antislavery, and approve of its actions. He did so without damage, in his mind, to his nonresistance.⁷⁰ He was able to reverse his abolitionist disunionism when he decided that the government was in fact antislavery. His nonresistant disunionism, he claimed never to have abandoned. Accordingly, on December 16, 1861, *The Liberator* underwent a subtle but significant change. Where its masthead had long declared Garrison's conviction that the Constitution was a "covenant with death," it now enjoined its readers to "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants thereof."⁷¹ Garrison did not explain or fret over the change, for the removal of the disunion slogan reflected in his mind a shift in his abolitionist sentiment, not in his nonresistant stand.⁷²

The reversal of abolitionist disunionism paradoxically allowed Garrison to approve of the war to end slavery, while condemning all of the apparatuses and organizations busily engaged in fighting it. It allowed him to praise the war as an abolitionist, while condemning it as an advocate of peace. But Garrison needed one more trick to make this theoretical legerdemain work. To approve of the war, even as an abolitionist, he had to demonstrate that it was in fact a war to end slavery. That was no easier in 1861 than it has been for historians since that time. He admitted that the war was "technically and

69. Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism, pp. 196-203.

70. See Perry, Radical Abolitionism, p. 161, and Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism, pp. 216-217.

71. The Liberator, December 13, 1861.

72. Kraditor, Means and Ends in American Abolitionism, p. 208.

ostensibly" for the preservation of the union. But in reality, to him it was "a struggle between the free and slave states — i.e., between freedom and slavery — between free institutions and slave institutions — between the ideas of the nineteenth and those of the twelfth century."⁷³

It did not discourage Garrison at all that abolition was not originally one of the stated claims of the Northern belligerents. He realized that "of the great body of soldiers who have enlisted at the North, comparatively few have any intention or wish to break down the slave system." And he agreed with his friend George Thompson's assessment (before the Emancipation Proclamation) that he need not be "discouraged because the abolition of slavery is not one of the declared objects of the president in the struggle he had commenced."⁷⁴ Lincoln and his soldiers, in spite of themselves, were tools of God, being used to achieve emancipation even in their misguided attempts to save a rotten union. "Lincoln, Republicanism . . . [and] even the other parties, now that they are fusing for a death-grapple with the Southern slave oligarchy . . . are instruments in the hands of God to carry forward and help achieve the great object of emancipation," he declared.⁷⁵ The war was thus an antislavery war, whether the participants realized it or not, and it indicated "the waning power of slavery and the irresistible growth of freedom." It was "acknowledged to be irrepressible — not of man's devising, but of God's ordering."⁷⁶ Of course, the Emancipation Proclamation (whatever its limitations and political motivations) only confirmed Garrison's interpretation of the true meaning of the war.

Having disposed of the technicality of the purpose of the war, Garrison then felt free to address the President in a manner that might have sent a shudder down the respective spines of orthodox nonresistants: "Sir, the power is in your hands as President of the United States, and Commander-in-Chief of the

73. Garrison to James S. Gibbons, April 28, 1861, in Ruchames and Merrill, Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, V: 19.

74. Garrison to Aaron M. Powell, May 14, 1861, in *ibid.*, V: 27; George Thompson to Garrison, June 7, 1861, quoted in The Liberator, June 28, 1861.

75. Garrison to Oliver Johnson, April 19, 1861, in *ibid.*, V: 17.

76. The Liberator, February 7, 1862; Garrison to J. Miller McKim, October 21, 1860, in Ruchames and Merrill, Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, IV: 698.

army and navy," he wrote. "Do your duty" The President and the Northern army were identified so closely with the work of God, in fact, that the Constitution under which they worked — the same constitution that had so recently been anathema to both the nonresistants and the abolitionists — began to be seen in a new light, vindicated by the struggle being undertaken in its name.⁷⁷

The Constitution, once considered by Garrison to be a charter for coercion, once an "agreement with Hell," a copy of which Garrison had burned in angry protest, now was held as the very document by which the slaves would be freed, and the measure by which the South was to be judged and condemned. The Constitution could still be condemned as the tool of the slaveholders, but "in trampling upon that Constitution which was originally made as dictated by themselves," Garrison wrote, the South ran counter to every "recognized theory of Government." The South therefore bore the blame for the war, and ought to be condemned by all, abolitionist or not. The North did not seek dominance over the South, as some charged, but rather it sought "renewal" of the democratic ideals of the Revolution, ideals embodied in the Constitution. Lincoln had no choice as president but to defend the Union and its Constitution, or he would prove himself to be guilty of perjury and treason.⁷⁸

It was ironic that Garrison should find himself discussing treason to the Constitution, but fitting, perhaps, that Garrison should discuss the penalties for treason, for therein lay the first tenet of Garrison's fragmented nonresistance: his doctrine of the inviolability of human life. Already implicit in the acceptance of war, the judgment of treason made this last step explicit. The South was guilty of treason, and the "punishment for treason [was] death." In any case, "the power of the Government in the exercise of its legitimate functions, is absolute," he admitted.⁷⁹

The admission of government's absolute power to do anything at all represents the closing of the circle of Garrison's thought. Nonresistant pacifist anarchy had become orthodox acceptance of the civil government exercising legitimate and

77. *The Liberator*, February 7, 1862; Garrison to James McKay, March 4, 1862, in Ruchames and Merrill, *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, V: 76.

78. Garrison to James McKay, March 4, 1862, in Ruchames and Merrill, *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, V: 76.

79. *Ibid.*

"absolute" powers over the lives of its citizens. No evidence exists to suggest that Garrison ever considered the implications of that admission upon domestic, ecclesiastic, or, for that matter, slaveholding governments. Garrison the nonresistant apparently never considered it necessary to ask those questions of Garrison the abolitionist.

Garrison had been a pacifist, but pacifism was not unusual among thinking persons of the first half of the nineteenth century. He had also been an abolitionist, a temperance advocate, a feminist, and an anti-Sabbatarian; he protested against capital punishment, the mistreatment of the Indians and animals, and the use of tobacco. But what distinguished Garrison and his followers from most other antebellum reformers was his belief that all reforms were only various aspects of a single movement toward the perfection of the human race, a purification that was seen as both possible and necessary. They were all, in fact, a *single* reform, gathered under the title "universal emancipation from sin," striving, each in its own fashion, to free the human race from bondage to itself. Servitude of persons to other persons, or to any authority, was replaced by servitude only to God, whose authority was showered directly and undiluted upon each individual. Garrison sought to replace self-serving secular institutions — warfare, slavery, the "domestic institution," civil government, and churches — whose typical trait and main weapon was coercion, with a society of enlightened, regenerate Christians, each of whom was assured of absolute equality in the community of the justified, subservient only to God. But in the end, Garrison's vision of a family of unified reforms could not survive his choice of one child over another.