Since the founding of the first British colonies, slavery has been at the core of US history. Discussions of slavery’s contradictions with the freedoms declared during the American Revolution and the founding fathers’ musings on the subject interest historians of the colonial and revolutionary periods, while the later, more divisive nature of slavery preoccupies Civil War and nineteenth-century historians. Yet there is a period in the middle of these two wars that is often overlooked, and this is precisely where Alan Taylor situates his new Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Internal Enemy*.

Set in the period between 1772 and 1832, the book examines the role of Virginian slavery in the War of 1812 and the resulting fears of Virginia slaveholders that led to heightened tensions afterwards. The debates of Virginia’s founding fathers over the issue of slavery are well documented; yet, despite the language of independence during the Revolution, Virginian leaders put in place new laws that strengthened slavery and dismissed plans for gradual emancipation. For Virginia slaves, the new laws supporting white liberty and the rise of the middle class meant an increase of familial separation and long-term enslavement.

Thus, when the British arrived on American shores during the War of 1812, Virginian slaves living along the coast saw a new opportunity to escape. Even though Britain still had slavery within its empire, the British were closer to abolition than America was. Taylor places much of the initiative in the hands of slaves who began to run away to British warships starting in 1812. Initially, the British only wanted a few black guides who could help them navigate the Virginia coast, but as more and more fugitives escaped to British ships officers recognized that these runaways could be very helpful. Male refugees provided crucial manpower—many joined up as guides or enlisted as Colonial Marines—and necessary local knowledge. In return, British officers took in the families of these men, allowed them to loot their former plantations and rescue family and friends, and provided freedom after the war. By the end of
the war, it was British policy to recruit slaves to run away from their masters.

As Taylor describes, the willingness of their slaves to run away to the enemy and then turn around and attack them played into fears already held by Virginia slave owners. Not only did they “have the wolf by the ears,” as Jefferson so famously declared; Virginians realized that they had bred an internal enemy within their own households and society. Furthermore, the successful slave revolt a decade earlier in Saint-Domingue caused all American slaveholders to be on edge. The deepest fear held by slaveholders of the nineteenth century was that of slave revolt, and now it seemed the British were instigating just that on Virginia’s coastline.

As a result of the War of 1812, Taylor argues, Virginians developed a stronger states’ rights position due to their claims that the federal government had done little to protect their slave property during the war and compensate them properly for those slaves lost (around 3,400 from Maryland and Virginia). Virginians, and Southerners as a whole, responded to future threats against their property or safety harshly; one example Taylor cites concerns the Missouri Compromise, wherein Virginians fought against restrictions on slavery’s expansion due to fears of being trapped in one region with their “internal enemy.” Nat Turner’s Rebellion, which closes the book, did nothing to allay the fears of Virginia slave owners as they became more convinced that they had to hold on tightly to slavery for their own good.

Taylor’s analysis is richly grounded in the experiences of slaves and runaways as well as the masters trying to control them. His is not a military history of the War of 1812, but a social work adding slavery as a new layer to that story (deftly weaving military strategy and the context of war with the social history of slavery). Beyond the correspondence and papers of white slaveholders and military officers, Taylor utilizes postwar applications for compensation by masters seeking payment from the government for lost slaves. These files contain descriptions of slaves and their escapes, information about slave families and daily life, evidence of the slaves’ willingness to turn on their masters, and a few rare letters written by escaped slaves addressing their former masters. These sources allow Taylor to capture slave experiences and put them alongside the experiences of their masters during the war.

Well written, grounded in intriguing personal stories, and filling a gap in historical scholarship, Taylor’s work richly deserves the praise it has received. By focusing on the period between the founding of the United States and the crisis of disunion in the mid-nineteenth century, Taylor has connected the timeline of slavery from early America to antebellum America. Readers can trace how the decisions about slavery made during the Revolution influenced the generations to come through the struggles of Virginia in the War of 1812. In addition, Taylor has captured the experiences of both black and white participants through his sources and writing. Overall, The Internal Enemy proves a worthy addition to the scholarship on American slavery, the War of 1812, the antebellum period, and even the Civil War as it explains and foreshadows the trials to come.
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