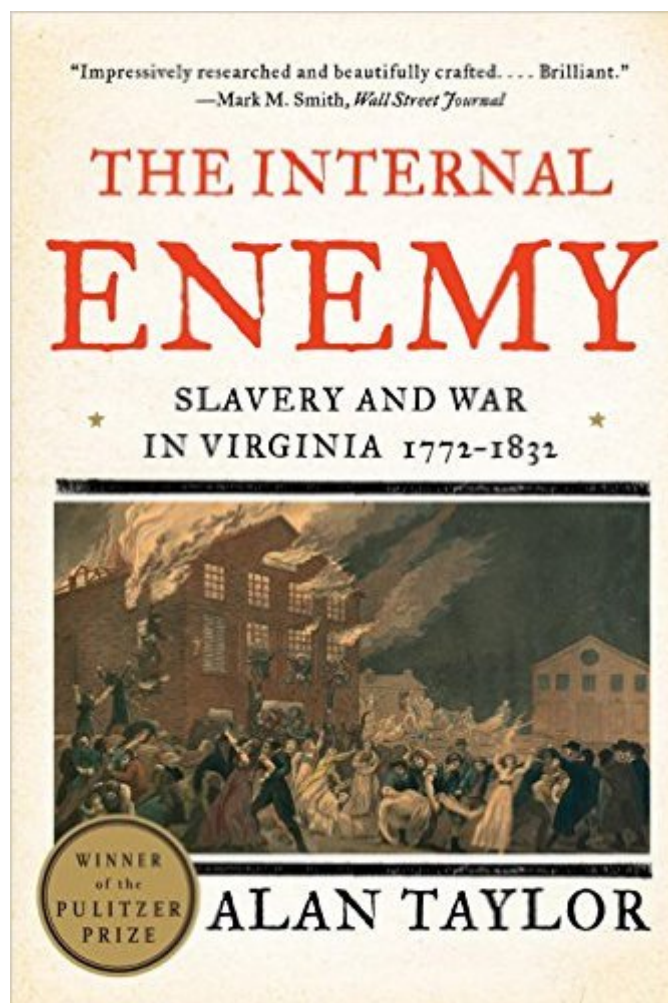


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The Internal Enemy: Slavery And War In Virginia, 1772-1832



Synopsis

Winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for History "Impressively researched and beautifully craftedâ a brilliant account of slavery in Virginia during and after the Revolution." âMark M. Smith, Wall Street Journal

Frederick Douglass recalled that slaves living along Chesapeake Bay longingly viewed sailing ships as "freedomâs swift-winged angels." In 1813 those angels appeared in the bay as British warships coming to punish the Americans for declaring war on the empire. Over many nights, hundreds of slaves paddled out to the warships seeking protection for their families from the ravages of slavery. The runaways pressured the British admirals into becoming liberators. As guides, pilots, sailors, and marines, the former slaves used their intimate knowledge of the countryside to transform the war. They enabled the British to escalate their onshore attacks and to capture and burn Washington, D.C. Tidewater masters had long dreaded their slaves as "an internal enemy." By mobilizing that enemy, the war ignited the deepest fears of Chesapeake slaveholders. It also alienated Virginians from a national government that had neglected their defense. Instead they turned south, their interests aligning more and more with their section. In 1820 Thomas Jefferson observed of sectionalism: "Like a firebell in the night [it] awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once the knell of the union." The notes of alarm in Jefferson's comment speak of the fear aroused by the recent crisis over slavery in his home state. His vision of a cataclysm to come proved prescient. Jefferson's startling observation registered a turn in the nationâs course, a pivot from the national purpose of the founding toward the threat of disunion. Drawn from new sources, Alan Taylor's riveting narrative re-creates the events that inspired black Virginians, haunted slaveholders, and set the nation on a new and dangerous course. 35 illustrations; 4 maps

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As the author explains, "the internal enemy" was a phrase used by some Americans to speak of slaves, especially during times of war. In states like Virginia, with its many thousands of slaves, free people used this expression to speak of slave rebellion and sabotage, or at least their potential. The phrase could refer to runaways who took refuge with, provided information to, and sometimes even fought for the external enemy, the British. The chronological bookends of the subtitle, 1772 and 1832, are significant. The first date refers to the Somerset decision in Great Britain, a legal ruling which had the effect of threatening the future of slavery in the British American colonies and thereby hastening the American Revolution (pp. 19-23). Following the uniquely-bloody slave rebellion of 1831 led by Nat Turner, in 1832 Thomas Jefferson Randolph, a grandson of Thomas Jefferson, introduced to the Virginia legislature a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery. Taylor suggests that the vote against that plan was a milestone in the road that led to the Civil War (pp. 414-17). Yet, almost all of the book focuses on 1812-15, the years of the War of 1812. During that war, it was common for slaves, especially from the Tidewater region of Virginia, to escape to British warships in the Chesapeake Bay. In this book, Taylor is intent on showing that as the American Revolution heated up, events in Virginia were just as significant as better-known events in Massachusetts. He also wants to show that the activities of rebellious slaves made the War of 1812 significantly worse for Virginians, and for the American republic in general. For example, unlike British troops, slaves knew the terrain and hideouts on land.

Another fine book about the early American republic by this consistently interesting scholar. Taylor's prior books largely explore the complexities of life in the northern parts of the Republic. This book focuses on Virginia, particularly the Chesapeake region and the relationships between slaves and masters. Taylor provides an illuminating view of the nature of slavery by describing and analyzing the flight of slaves from Tidewater plantations during the War of 1812. Slavery significantly impacted the war in at least 2 important ways. Obsessed with fear of slave insurrection, whites consistently divided their limited military resources between attempting to police slaves and fending off British incursions. Particularly in the last year of the war, escaped slaves became important allies for the British. The latter, who were able to devote only modest naval resources to the American war, pursued an intelligently focused raiding strategy in the Chesapeake region. Escaped slaves were crucial guides and later effective military auxiliaries for the marauding British, playing a key role in

many small and large operations, including the short and humiliating occupation of Washington, DC. Hundreds of slaves fled to assist the British, confounding the paternalistic understandings of the slaveholders and their herrenvolk republicanism. Drawing on some very interesting primary source materials, Taylor includes a number of detailed analyses of this process, as well as insightful analyses of the social and political dynamics of slavery in early republican Virginia. There is also some interesting discussion of the political strains imposed by the war and the way in which it threatened the existence of the early Republic. He also deals well with the consequences of these events.

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