

Towards Freedom: An Analysis of Slave Revolts in the United States

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY of slavery in the United States there occurred a variety of more or less subtle expressions of opposition to the slave system by the enslaved. Opposition took many forms, ranging from individual attempts to thwart the system through negligence in work to mass endeavors to overthrow the system. One class of opposition to the status of servitude is represented by slave revolts, which may be defined minimally as attempts to achieve freedom by groups of slaves. Although the data on slave revolts are fragmentary, three types may be distinguished on the basis of sixty-five cases meeting this minimal definition. These are Systematic or Rational Revolts, Unsystematic or Vandalistic Revolts, and Situational or Opportunistic Revolts. The analysis of the characteristics of each of these types of revolt, of their distribution in time and space, of their leadership, and of their repercussions is the concern of this paper.

The three types of slave revolt differ in form, purpose, salient attributes, territorial extent, and participants. Variable aspects of these categories are expressed in Tables 1, 2, and 3. While each table summarizes the available evidence on revolts of a particular type, further elaboration of the content and implications of these categories is necessary.

The Type I or Systematic Revolt, of which the prototypes are the conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, is oriented towards overthrowing the slave system itself and establishing a Negro state. It is characterized, therefore, by careful planning and organization which necessitate a considerable period of preparation. Careful planning is evidenced by the means decided upon to realize the establishment of the Negro state. Both Prosser and Vesey planned initially to gain control of a city and thereafter to extend their operations into the surrounding area. Such a plan involves the systematic allocation of tasks to various groups and individuals and the calculation of the numbers of insurgents upon whom reliance could be placed. Further evidence of the rational conception of these uprisings is found in the facts that Gabriel Prosser intended to spare certain sympathetic groups of whites and hoped for aid from poor whites and Indians, and that Vesey hoped to have exter-

nal aid from the West Indies and Africa to maintain his state after its establishment.¹ One corollary of such systematic planning is a long period of preparation which, in turn, increases the likelihood of discovery by the slavocracy; it is not surprising, therefore, that of the seventeen Type I Revolts² which have been distinguished, only one went beyond the planning phase. A second corollary of such rational planning is that it is likely to involve the recruitment of a large number of insurgents from a number of counties.

Two aspects of Type I Revolts merit further comment: the urban factor and armed conflict with the slavocracy. The urban factor is significant in 71 percent of the Type I Revolts, five of them occurring within an urban complex and seven others initially oriented towards gaining control of a city. The urban factor appears to have been significant as a source both of more cosmopolitan ideas and of greater role differentiation for Negroes. This does not imply that Type I Revolts are necessarily urban inspired. While Vesey was a resident of Charleston, South Carolina, Prosser lived six miles outside of Richmond, Virginia. Moreover, 29 percent of the Type I Revolts were not urban oriented. Thus the urban factor seems to facilitate rather than to determine the development of Type I Revolts. The second noteworthy aspect of Type I Revolts is that while the achievement of their ultimate goals necessitates armed conflict with members of the slavocracy potentially leading to bloodshed and property destruction, this is a secondary phenomenon rather than a primary goal.

By contrast, the Type II or Vandalistic Revolt, of which the prototype is Nat Turner's insurrection, represents a haphazard expression of opposition to the slave system aimed at the destruction of slave holders and their property. It lacks systematic preparation but may be either of lengthy or of virtually spontaneous conception. Its unsystematic character and potential spontaneity imply both that it has a greater likelihood of reaching the activist stage³ than Type I Revolts and that reliance upon the gathering of recruits as the revolt gains momentum is of more importance than in the Type I Revolt. For example, deciding one Sunday afternoon to begin his long contemplated revolt that night, Turner set out with a handful of fellow insurgents whose numbers swelled to seventy during the course of the rising.⁴ A further implication of the unsystematic nature of the Type II Revolt is that it tends to be localized within a single county and to be a rural rather than an urban-oriented phenomenon.⁵ Moreover, lacking any well-defined goals

¹ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), pp. 101-02, 220, 225; 272, 286. Joseph Cephas Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States 1800-1865* (Boston, 1833), p. 50.

² Table 1 summarizes the evidence for Type I Revolts.

³ Of the fourteen Type II Revolts, 58 percent succeeded in achieving this stage.

⁴ Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-98.

⁵ Table 2 summarizes the data on Type II Revolts.

TABLE 1
TYPE I REVOLTS¹

Revolt	Form	Aim:		Systematic Characteristics:			Area	Participants:	
		Establish Negro State	Take City	Months Prepara- tion	Plan:			Leader	Insur- gents
					For Retreat	To Spare Groups			
Md. 1739	C	x		several	x		1co		200
N.Y. 1712	R			3			1ci		25-30
Va. 1693	C			several			1co		W,S
Va. 1722	C	x					3co	3S	
Va. 1792	C		x	several			4co		600+
Va. 1793	C			4			1ci		
Va. 1800 ²	C	x	x	6		x	4co	1S	c.7,000
Va. 1816	C		x				3co	1W	
S.C. 1720	C		x						"large"
S.C. 1816	C		x	8			1ci		
S.C. 1822 ³	C	x	x	7		x	80mi	1F	c.7,000
Ga. 1810	C			1		x	2co		
Ga. 1819	C						1ci	S	
Ga. 1841	C		x						S,W
La. 1837	C		x			x	1co		F,S
La. 1840	C						7co		400 + S 4 W
La. 1853	C						1ci	1S 1W	2,500S 100W

KEY:
C:conspiracy
R:actual revolt
x:variable present

ci:city
co:county
mi:miles
F:Free Negro

S:slave
W:white
WI:indentured white

¹Unless otherwise noted the data contained in this and subsequent tables are based upon material derived from Aptheker, op. cit.

²Gabriel Prosser's Revolt.

³Denmark Vesey's Revolt.

beyond the immediate destruction of the life and property of the slaveholder, the Type II Revolt implies the insurgents' unconscious acceptance of ultimate capitulation to the power of the slavocracy.⁶

The Type III or Opportunistic Revolt aims at escape from servitude. It is characterized by a group of slaves attempting to escape either to a non-slave area or from removal to areas of more oppressive servitude. It tends, therefore, to be situationally determined. Given the realistic opportunity to escape to a free area by land or sea, the group attempts to realize this objective. Thus like the Type I Revolt it is rationally conceived, and like the Type II Revolt it may be virtually spontaneous.⁷ Significantly, the only successful slave revolt of which there is evidence falls into the Type III category.⁸

Slave revolts of all three types occurred throughout the slave period and in all the slave regions of the United States. The distribution of types of slave revolts in time and space is summarized in Table 4. If the slave period is divided into Pre-1776 or Colonial, 1776-1800 or Revolutionary, 1801-1829 or Old South Slave, and 1830-1860 or Deep South Slave periods, a number of broad trends are observable. In the Colonial period, slave revolts occurred in Northern colonies as well as in Southern colonies; in the Southern colonies they developed primarily in Virginia and South Carolina. In the Revolutionary period with the disappearance of the slave system from the North and its extension in the South, slave revolts necessarily originated only in Southern states, primarily in Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana. During the predominance of slavery in the Old South, slave revolts mainly occurred there and in border states. As the New South pattern was entrenched in the final period of slavery, slave revolts took place there as well as in other parts of the slave region.⁹

A noteworthy aspect of the distribution of slave revolts is the concentration of types of slave revolts in time. Type I Revolts occur fairly consistently throughout the slave period with slight peaks in the Colonial and Old South periods. Type II Revolts are a predominantly Colonial phenomenon (56 percent), while Type III are concentrated in the New South Period (58 percent). The predominance of Type III Revolts in the last period of slavery may be attributed to the increasingly oppressive character of slavery during this time, particularly in the New South, which made any other type of revolt virtually impracticable.

⁶ The characterization of Type I and Type II Revolts has been based primarily on an analysis of their prototypes. Despite necessarily fragmentary evidence, it was decided to classify 28 other revolts as Type I or Type II. There are, however, 22 other conspiracies on which data are insufficient to classify as either Type I or Type II, but on which there is some useful information; they have been placed in a residual category: "7." The following conspiracies fall into Type "7": Ark.-La. 1856; D.C. 1836; Ky. 1810, 1836; La. 1812, 1835, 1856; N. C. 1825, 1835; S. C. 1713, 1829, 1836; Ga. 1835; Md. 1805; N. J. 1772; Tenn. 1856; Texas 1856; Va. 1709, 1710, 1723, 1730, 1810.

⁷ Table 3 summarizes the data on Type III Revolts.

⁸ Texas 1851. Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

⁹ For relative and absolute shifts in the Negro population of various states see United States Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population 1780-1915* (Washington, 1918), pp. 51, 57.

TABLE 2
TYPE II REVOLTS

Revolt	Form	Aim: Destruction Property and/or Slave Holders	Unsystematic Characteristics:		Area	Participants:	
			Lack Preparation	Gathering Recruits		Leader	Insurgents
N.Y. 1708	R	x			1to		"small"
Va. 1687	C	x			1co		
Va. 1691	R	x			1co	S	
Va. 1792	R	x		x	1co		900
Va. 1831 ¹	R	x	x	x	1co	S	70
N.C. 1776	C	x			3co	1S 1W	
S.C. 1711	R	x				S	"several"
S.C. 1730	C		x		1ci		
S.C. 1740	R		x	x			150-200
Ga. 1774	R	x	x		1co		10 ²
La. 1730	C	x			1ci		
La. 1795	C	x	x		1co		
La. 1811	R	x		x	2co	F	400-500
Miss. 1835	C	x			1co	W	

KEY:
C:conspiracy
R:actual revolt
x:variable present

ci:city
co:county
to:town

F:Free Negro
S:slave
W:white

¹Turner's Revolt.
²Carroll, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

Finally, it should be mentioned that slave revolts were not evenly distributed spatially over the slave region. They were concentrated within three main areas: Virginia (25 percent), Louisiana (15 percent), and South Carolina (15.5 percent). Further, despite variations in time, within these states revolts clustered in a few counties. In Virginia revolts tended to recur in the coastal tobacco counties; Gabriel Prosser's revolt, however, encompassed the inland counties of Henrico, Louisa, Hanover, Chesterfield, and Caroline,¹⁰ some of which were involved in

TABLE 3
TYPE III REVOLTS

Revolt	Form	Aim:				Armed	Participants:	
		Escape:					Leader	Insurgents
		To Free State	From Safe South	Outside USA	To Indians			
Penn. 1734 ¹	C				x			
Md. 1845	R	x				x	75	
Ky. 1829	R		x				90	
Ky. 1848	R	x				x	1W 75	
Mo. 1836	C			x				
Mo. 1850	R	x				x	1S 30	
Va. 1799	R		x					
S.C. 1826	R				x			
Ga. 1849	C			x			300	
Ga.-Md. 1826	R		x				29	
La. 1840	C			x			1S	
Texas 1851	R			x				

KEY:
C:conspiracy
R:actual revolt

x:variable present
S:slave
W:white

¹ Joshua Coffin, *An Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections* (New York, 1890), p. 14.

another Type I Revolt in 1816. The following tabulation summarizes the agricultural situation in the eighteen insurrection counties of Virginia in 1860:

Eighteen Revolt Counties (12 percent) of Virginia-1860¹¹
percent of State total

Crop: tobacco	14	Slaves	24
Slave holders	25	Holdings (acres)	
(300-499	0	1,000+	15
200-299	50	3-9	13
1-3	24)		

¹⁰ Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

¹¹ United States Census Office, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860* (Washington, 1864), pp. 155, 159, 163, 218-19, 243-45.

TABLE 4
DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVE REVOLTS

TYPE	PRE-1776	1776-1800	1801-1829	1830-1860	TOTAL
I	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
N.Y.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Md.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Va.	3.0	4.5	1.5	0.0	
S.C.	1.5	0.0	3.0	0.0	
Ga.	0.0	0.0	3.0	1.5	
La.	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.5	
	8.0	4.5	8.0	6.0	26.5
II	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
N.Y.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Va.	3.0	1.5	0.0	1.5	
N.C.	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.0	
S.C.	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Ga.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
La.	1.5	1.5	1.5	0.0	
Miss.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
	12.0	4.5	1.5	3.0	21.5
"?"	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
N.J.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Md.	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.0	
D.C.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
Ky.	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5	
Tenn.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
N.C.	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5	
S.C.	1.5	0.0	1.5	1.5	
Ga.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
La.	0.0	0.0	1.5	4.5	
Texas	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
Va.	6.0	0.0	1.5	0.0	
	9.0	0.0	9.0	15.0	33.0
III	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Penn.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Md.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
Ky.	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5	
Mo.	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	
Va.	0.0	1.5	0.0	0.0	
S.C.	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	
La.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
Ga.	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
Ga.-Md.	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.0	
Texas	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	
	3.0	2.0	3.0	11.0	19.0
TOTAL	32.0%	11.0%	22.0%	35.0%	100.0%

The slave revolt counties of Virginia were primarily tobacco plantation counties. In tobacco culture "the great properties were usually divided . . . into several plantations for more convenient operation."¹² Thus slavery under this system was less oppressive than in the Mississippi Delta region of the New South period.

With one exception the slave revolts of South Carolina were restricted to Charleston County. The principal plantation crop was rice, which involved larger plantation units and a greater number of slaves than tobacco, a task system of production, and frequently absentee landlordism.¹³ The following tabulation summarizes the agricultural picture in the two insurrection counties of South Carolina in 1860:

Two Revolt Counties (7 percent) of South Carolina-1860¹⁴
percent of State total

Crop: rice	63
Slave holders	11
(1,000+	100
500-999	43
1-3	19)
Slaves	14
Holdings (acres)	
1,000+	8
3-9	17

Considering the patently oppressive nature of the slave system associated with rice culture, it does not seem accidental that slave insurrections should have taken place predominantly in Charleston County with its major urban complex.

Although a few slave revolts in Louisiana occurred in the vicinity of New Orleans, most of the revolts recurred in counties bordering the Mississippi River north and west of Baton Rouge. Although there was considerable agricultural diversification in these counties, they were primarily sugar producers. Like rice, sugar production involved large numbers of robust adult slaves.¹⁵ The general agricultural set-up in the insurrection counties of Louisiana in 1860 is summarized in the following tabulation:

Ten Revolt Counties (21 percent) of Louisiana-1860¹⁶
percent of State total

Crops: rice	15
cotton	16
cane sugar	41

¹² Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1952), p. 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 228, 250, 258.

¹⁴ United States Census Office, *op. cit.*, pp. 129, 214, 237.

¹⁵ Phillips, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-87, 245.

¹⁶ United States Census Office, *op. cit.*, pp. 87, 69, 202, 236.

Slave holders	38
(500-999	25
300-499	35
1-3	23)
Slaves	30
Holdings(acres)	
1,000+	25
3-9	33

Among the factors which may have facilitated the development of these up-river revolts are proximity to a great communication network, agricultural diversification, and a fairly high proportion of small holdings.

Thus the pattern of a real clustering of slave revolts irrespective of temporal variations suggests that aside from the immediate catalysts which might induce a particular slave revolt, certain socio-economic variables facilitated their occurrence and recurrence in certain areas. Fundamentally, these socio-economic factors imply an alleviation of the condition of slavery due either to the type of plantation system itself or to access to external sources of communication as inherent in propinquity to an urban center or a transportation network. These constitute a few of the factors which are considered necessary preconditions for slave revolts.

Other more immediate factors also seem to constitute preconditions for slave revolts. These may include rapid population fluctuations often leading to a significantly higher proportion of Negroes in an area¹⁷ and revolutionary ideas current in the wider society of the time.¹⁸ In my view, none of these possible preconditions constitute sufficient cause for the development of a slave revolt. Rather there must be a catalyst in the form of an individual or individuals.

This catalyst may arise from within or without the slave system. The leaders of slave revolts have been drawn from the social categories of free Negro, slave, and white. The type of revolt does not appear to be determined by the social type of the catalyst. Vesey (Type I) was a free Negro, Prosser (Type I) and Turner (Type II) were slaves, Boxley (Type I) and Doyle (Type III) were whites.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Boxley is probably exceptional, as the ultimate aim of a Type I Revolt would be unlikely to appeal to many whites.

Although very little data on Negro leaders of slave revolts are available, the three leaders of the most famous revolts furnish suggestions of relevant social and personality variables. Each of these men had had opportunities which the ordinary field hand would never have ex-

¹⁷ E.g., Turner's revolt and Mississippi Revolt of 1835; Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 283, 325.

¹⁸ E.g., the influence of the Missouri debate on Vesey; Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 276; the importance of

David Walker's Appeal for Turner; Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹⁹ Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-56, 338. See Tables 1, 2 and 3.

perienced. Vesey had traveled extensively as a slave; as a freedman he was an urban artisan; he was literate and aware of the Haitian success and the Missouri debate.²⁰ Both Prosser and Turner were slaves. Gabriel Prosser was a blacksmith and probably literate.²¹ Turner was literate, had been a slave overseer, enjoyed making inventive experiments, and may have been a Baptist preacher.²² Thus all three leaders had had opportunities to play more than one social role and had had access to a variety of ideas.

The personality of Negro leaders also appears to be a significant variable. The three major leaders were clearly charismatic individuals. They were imbued with a sense of personal destiny and considered themselves to be divinely inspired and sanctioned in their endeavors.²³ It seems likely that such charisma and egotism would be essential for any Negro leader to dare to challenge the power of the slavocracy. There is, however, an important personality difference between these leaders which appears to be linked to the type of revolt inspired by them. Neither Vesey nor Prosser was so self-absorbed that he could not formulate a rational plan and assign specific duties to assistants. The techniques which Vesey employed for binding the masses to his endeavor are particularly fascinating: among his lieutenants were a "sorcerer" whose charms were considered to make their wearers inviolable and a blind preacher who was believed to possess second-sight.²⁴ Vesey clearly understood the importance of psychological as well as technological preparation for the success of his scheme. Turner, on the other hand, seems to have been so self-absorbed that it is unlikely that he could have formulated and executed a consistent plan. Thus, there appears to be two personality types represented by these three leaders; the one in which rationality has precedence over egotistical emotionalism, and its converse. This distinction is borne out by the conduct of the men following their capture: Vesey and Prosser revealed very little about their intentions and maintained themselves stoically until their deaths; Turner met his fate no less courageously but after a lengthy and effusive confession. How many Vesey-Prosser and how many Turner personality types led slave revolts is unknown. It is hypothesized that only a Vesey-Prosser type could lead a Type I Revolt, though Types II and III might have been led by either personality type.²⁵

The final aspect of slave revolts to be discussed is their repercussions both within the area of the revolt and in other areas. As shown in Table

²⁰ Carroll, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 85; Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

²¹ Cf. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 48 and T. W. Higginson, "Gabriel's Defeat," *Atlantic Monthly* X (1862), 338. Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²² William Sidney Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection* (Washington, 1900), p. 28; Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130 and John W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *Journal of Negro History* V (1920), 209.

²³ E.g., Turner: Carroll, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-31; Gabriel: *ibid.*, p. 149; Vesey: *ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-93.

²⁵ Evidence from two Type I Revolts supports this hypothesis: Georgia 1819, Maryland 1739; Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 191, 283.

TABLE 5
REPERCUSSIONS OF SLAVE REVOLTS WITHIN THE AREA AND IN OTHER AREAS

Revolt	Within the Area:									In Other Areas:				
	Panic and Vengeance against:				Repressive Measures:			Ameliorative Measures:		Revolt Rumors	Slave Unrest	Repressive Measures:		Ameliorative Measures:
	Insurgents	Other Negroes	White Moderates	Outsiders	Increased Armed Oppressions	Legislation Against Slaves	Free Negro	Increased Emancipation Sentiment	Improved Conditions			Colonization Schemes	Legislation against Slaves	
TYPE I Pre-1776 Va. 1663	x													
NY 1712	x	x				x								
Md. 1739	x													
1776-1800 Va. 1792	x	x				x								
Va. 1690*	x	x			x	x	x			x	S.C.	Va.	x	x
1801-1829 Va. 1816	x	?												
Ga. 1819	x													
SC 1822*	x				x	x	x					no		North
1830-1860 La. 1837	x	?			x									
Ga. 1841	x													
TYPE II Pre-1776 Va. 1667	x					x								
NY 1708	x					x								
La. 1730	x													
SC 1740	x					x			x					
1776-1800 NC 1776	x	x												
Va. 1792	x	x												
La. 1795	x	?												
1801-1829 La. 1811	x	?												
1830-1860 Va. 1831*	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x
Miss. '35*	x	x	x	x										
TYPE "2" Pre-1776 Va. 1723	x													
Va. 1730	x													
1801-1829 SC 1829	x				x									
1830-1860 Ga. 1835	x													
NC 1835	x													
La. 1840	x	x												
La. 1856	x	x												
TYPE III 1801-1829 Ky. 1829	x													
1830-1860 Mo. 1836	x													
Md. 1845	x													
Ky. 1848	x											x		
Mo. 1850														x

*—see footnote 27.

5, throughout the slavery period the slavocracy reacted in a similar way to slave revolts. In its reactions it distinguished between Type III Revolts and the other types of revolt, but not between Type I and Type II revolts.²⁶ Thus Type III revolts always resulted in reprisals only against the immediate offenders. This is understandable as the situational and limited nature of this type of revolt was clear. Consequently, it was a phenomenon with which the slavocracy could deal in a relatively rational manner.

The reaction of the slavocracy to the Type I and Type II Revolts followed a different but consistent pattern.²⁷ A slave revolt resulted in a three-step syndrome within the area of revolt. There was an initial period of panic in which vengeance was wrought not only upon known insurgents but often upon innocent Negroes. During this period of mob panic and activity, aggression might also be vented upon white moderates within the area and upon outsiders who were disliked but not directly involved with the revolt. This period was followed by one in which increased armed oppression was used to enforce the threatened slave system. This second period was followed by one in which legislative measures were taken to prevent similar outbreaks. During the legislative debates ameliorative measures such as colonization schemes and proposals to reduce the oppressive character of the slave system were frequently discussed but rarely enacted. The upshot of the legislative period was invariably the harshening of repressive laws against both slaves and free Negroes.

Another aspect of the reaction of the slavocracy to a major slave revolt was the spread of the three-step syndrome, either partially or completely, to other slave areas not affected by the revolt. In part these measures may have been justified, for there is evidence that occasionally slaves in other areas were stimulated to emulate the attempts of the initial insurgents.

Nevertheless, both within the initial area of revolt and in other areas, the actual threat to the slavocracy was never great enough to invoke the exaggerated penalties which it evoked.²⁸ Yet indubitably the psychological threat makes this pattern comprehensible: a slave revolt whatever its form expresses the realization of the worst fears of the slavocracy and assaults its security at its most vulnerable point. These fears must be suppressed at all costs although the repressive measures

²⁶ See Table 5 for summary of data.

²⁷ This analysis is based on the four reactions for which we have sufficient data: the revolts of Turner, Prosser and Vesey and the Mississippi Revolt of 1835. See Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 226, 228, 271, 275, 300, 305; Carrol, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-60, 107-09, 138-39, 166, 178; Cromwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 212, 214-15, 221, 225, 231; Drewry, *op. cit.*, p. 83; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1957), p. 87; Higginson, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-44; Edwin A. Miles, "The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *Journal of Negro History*, XLII (1957), 49, 52-55.

²⁸ This fact was recognized by some contemporary observers. For example, less than ten days after Turner's bloody revolt, General Epps wrote the Governor of Virginia that local fear was exaggerated and that at no time were more than twenty men needed to put down the rebellion. Quoted in Drewry, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

taken were perceived by the slavocracy to lead to even greater threats to the system, for the members of the slavocracy assumed that an ill-treated slave was more likely to revolt than a well-treated one.

The data presented in this analysis supports a rather different conclusion from that of the slavocracy as to the effect of their measures. This conclusion has been vividly expressed by Frederick Douglass and has been stated more systematically recently by Davies and Elkins.²⁹ In *My Bondage* Douglass wrote: "Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well,—work him moderately—surround him with physical comfort,—and dreams of freedom intrude."³⁰ As has been noted in the preceding analysis, slave revolts tended to cluster in less oppressive slave areas and the catalyst for a revolt was an individual who had had opportunities to play multiple roles.³¹ On the other hand, given the high rate of betrayal of conspiracies by oppressed individuals who identified themselves more closely with the master than the slave, the adverse impact upon most slaves of the repressive measures of the slavocracy, and the absolute power of the slavocracy, one can but conclude that slave revolts in the United States were doomed to failure.

²⁹ James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, XXVII (1962), 6; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery* (Chicago, 1959).

³⁰ Quoted in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York, 1956), p. 89.

³¹ For the implications of multiple role-playing see Elkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 112 ff, 137-38.

