NOTES ON KING COTTON AND SLAVERY:

Even late in the 18th Century, cotton cultivation in the South was largely confined to the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, where the soil and climate were excellent for long-staple cotton. The hardier short-staple cotton could have been cultivated successfully across large areas of the South, but it was exceedingly difficult to clean. Its sticky seeds resisted extraction from the plant’s fibers. Then in 1793 Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, a machine that, even before any refinement in its operation, sped up by fifty times the rate at which cotton could be cleaned. At the same time that the preparation of cotton for market was made easier, demand for the fiber was increasing. In England, new textile factories with spinning and weaving machines cotton, but by 1820 the number had reached 334,378 and cotton accounted for more than half of United States agricultural exports.

With the advent of the cotton gin, new lands were brought into cultivation and large-scale farming of cotton increased in value and importance. The planting, cultivation, harvesting, ginning and loading of cotton on the docks had traditionally fallen to slaves, and so hand in hand with the spread of cotton culture came a tremendous increase in the need for slave labor. Slavery consequently became a more deeply entrenched part of southern life.

Although more acres were devoted to corn than to cotton, the fluffy white staple was the largest cash crop of all; cotton was king. The mainstay of the southern economy, cotton benefited the North and West as well. Northern merchants and bankers profited by shipping, insuring and marketing the crop. Northern manufacturers transformed it into thread and cloth in their humming mills and factories. Western farmers found a major market for their food production in the cotton-growing South.

By 1840 the South was producing 1.35 million bales of cotton. Output reached 2.85 million bales in 1849 and peaked at 4.8 million bales in 1860. As new lands were opened, cotton production and population moved west. By the 1830s the center of cotton production had shifted from South Carolina and Georgia to Alabama and Mississippi. By the 1850s cotton growing had reached Arkansas, Louisiana, and eastern Texas. Conditions in the older states also contributed to population shifts. Beginning in the 1820s, soil depletion affected the states of the Upper South, and they underwent a long depression that lowered tobacco and cotton prices. Many Upper South growers shifted to grain production, which required less labor. As a result, a profitable slave trade developed between Virginia and the states of the “newer” South.

Although Congress had formally ended the external slave trade in 1808, enforcement of the ban was weak. Africans continued to be smuggled into North America until the end of the Civil War. The great increase in slaves did not however mainly stem from this illegal trade, but rather from natural reproduction—the excess of African-American’s births over deaths. The 1.5 million slaves in 1820 increased to 4 million in 1860, paralleling the growth in the southern economy.
Some 75% of southern whites owned no slaves. Most were self-sufficient farmers. But the region was dominated by the production of cotton and by a labor system and a social system that rested on the institution of slavery. The availability of new land, a self-reproducing supply of cheap labor and low-cost river transportation down the Mississippi and other rivers helped keep cotton “king.”

“Original Sin,” from Simple Justice by Richard Kluger:

“It would have been hard to invent a more wasteful economic system. At its base was the black slave, who had no hope of improving his lot in life and thus no reason to work harder than he needed to in order to survive. To register their resistance, the slaves malingered whenever they could……and used a whole range of guerrilla tactics----from busting tools and mistreating animals to taking out their fury on the cotton itself by damaging young plants and picking “trashy bolls.” If the system was wasteful of labor, it was still more wasteful of the Southland’s earth itself. The soil, light to begin with, was steadily pounded by the heavy rainfall of the region and cotton and other cash crops failed to bind the topsoil. The cheap wrought-iron plows given the slaves in the 1840s and after stirred the ground to a depth of only a few inches. The net effect of these factors was to rob the soil of its fertility and invite severe erosion. Corrective measures were readily available….but in the long run it was cheaper not to bother restoring the land, for land was in far greater supply----half a nation of it, as the South kept adding states during the first fifty years of the century----than either labor or cold cash for the mountains of fertilizer it would have taken……..It was easier just to keep devouring new land, bring in the heaviest cash crops as fast as they could be harvested for as long as the land held out, and then move on.

Each new expansion of the cotton kingdom required massive infusions of capital to buy land, move slaves and supply them. Much of the seed money came from Northern and British financiers, and at interest rates that were far more predictable than the price of cotton grown on the new land. Here was a steady drain on the South’s profits. And……the planters found themselves too often at the mercy of the market. Their single-crop economy had no elasticity to cope with reverses like dropping prices or rising interest rates. The South paid much more than it should have for food imported from the West and basic manufactured goods from the North. They kept putting their profits into slavery, going increasingly into debt to do so if they had to, for slaves were the very root of their power as men, the source of their increasingly bloated pride, the foundation of their claims to a uniquely admirable civilization. They would do anything to keep their slaves for without them they would be like other men.

It was a way of life they loved too much to tolerate criticism of its values or its financial soundness. They would not take the steps necessary to integrate their region into the national economy……Instead, they sought to keep adding territory because that was the only way to keep the whole gaudy contraption from breaking down. The South had to keep growing, and so its political performance on the national level was brilliant and determined. Its spokesmen maneuvered with a sureness that had shaded into arrogance. They would have their own way or they would go their own way.
And……they did not fully understand how they had been manipulated by Northern financiers, shippers, railroads, and other commercial interests that were using the South’s great white harvest to offset the enormous quantity of goods that the nation, especially the West, was importing. The cotton crop served, in effect, as America’s collateral for its overseas credits, and so the businessmen of the North were not gladly going to suffer the South’s willful departure from the Union. Yet neither were the infant industrialists of Connecticut and Pennsylvania going to tear down tariff walls they needed to protect themselves from foreign competition in order to placate Southern planters…..Nor were the farmers clearing and plowing the prairies about to let the slave-masters push them into a corner of the Western plains as the poor whites had been shoved aside in the South. Nor were the abolitionists ready to accept that slavery could not legally be contained. The moment of inevitable collision would come.”