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Exploring our nation's bumpy beginnings

By Joseph Losos

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The United States is the richest, most powerful nation in the world. But the America of 200 years ago was a puny country. The American people were looked on by critical observers as a bunch of second-rate Europeans (or, worse yet, wild Indians) who might be picturesque or brave but were also pitiful and fundamentally insignificant.

In "Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies and Sparked the American Revolution" (Sourcebooks, 328 pages, \$24.95), Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen trace the role slavery played in the debates from the 1770s to the 1790s. They maintain that slavery did not just become a hot issue after 1820, as is generally believed, but that it was a pressing matter from the time that Lord Mansfield famously announced, in 1772, that slavery was odious to English principles and that nobody in Britain could be a slave.

That declaration, this book says, set shivers down the spines of Southern slave owners and was greatly responsible for the desire of Southerners for independence. Once free from Britain, the political leaders of the Southern states made sure that slavery was safe in their region, even if it meant giving up any claims for its expansion north of the Mason-Dixon line or the Ohio River.

This thesis is pursued with a determination that few historians would accept, but the sense of conflict over slavery is vividly presented. Jefferson does not look the same now as he did in the past. In this book, as in Garry Wills' recent work on the election of 1800, Timothy Pickering is a hero.

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(Modified as follows: excerpted, proofed.)