

Candidate evidence

Introduction

From the establishment of the United States in 1776 following a war of independence with Britain, tensions rose between the fundamentally different northern and southern sections of the country. In 1860, after the election of Abraham Lincoln as President, several Southern states declared secession to form the Confederate States of America. The Civil War started soon after when Southern troops initiated conflict at Fort Sumter.

Due to the complexity of the antebellum period, the identification of a single cause of the war is almost impossible. Despite this, slavery was the primary basis for the war, but not the sole factor. Many issues were also involved, including the debate over the expansion of the country, the rise of Republicanism and how Southerners reacted to this, and the increasingly apparent sectionalist differences between the North and South.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War Northern historians, including James Ford Rhodes, agreed with Lincoln that the war was related to slavery. Southern historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips continued to claim that secession was due to a federal violation into their rights as states. In the early twentieth century, the common consensus was that the cause of the war was the economic divide between North and South. Revisionist historians like James Randall and Avery Craven argued that the country was more united than it was divided, and instead blamed the war on a 'Blundering Generation' of politicians and extremists. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the vast majority of historians have been in agreement that slavery created tensions that eventually led to the Civil War.

Chapter I - Slavery

It seemed almost inevitable that the issue of slavery would cause great conflict, although its true extent could not be predicted at the inception of the Union. As early as 1787, after the creation of the Great Compromise, James Madison predicted the significance of slavery to the future of the country: “the real difference of interests lies, not between the large and small, but between the northern and southern states. The institution of slavery and its consequences form the line of discrimination.”¹

Initially, slavery was legal in all of the country but was more common in the South because of the soil and climate which were suited to the production of plantation crops, such as cotton, tobacco and sugar. Slaves were ideal for this sort of tough, unskilled labour. The North, although colder and less fertile than the South, still had thousands of slaves. By 1804, however, all Northern states had voted to outlaw slavery.

Despite its demise in the North, slavery saw no diminution in popularity in the South. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 revolutionised the agricultural industry and cotton production rose exponentially. By the mid-nineteenth century, ‘King Cotton’ comprised 50% of the country’s total exports.² It is important to emphasise the importance of slavery to the South; it not only defined the Southern economy, but its society too. Kenneth Stampp labelled slavery as “the very cornerstone of southern civilisation”.³

While celebrated in the South, slavery was reviled by most Northerners, became more convinced of a ‘slave power conspiracy’ – the theory that slaveholders and Southern politicians were united in their goal to prolong slavery. Northerners were increasingly paranoid of the South’s growing power.⁴

The cause of abolitionism became more popular; by 1838, the National Anti-Slavery Society had nearly 250,000 members. Some abolitionists were motivated by a religious or moral concern over slaves, recognising that the very nature of slavery contrasted with the

¹ George Bancroft. *History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States of America*. (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1882) p. 86

² Alan Farmer. *The Origins of the US Civil War*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) p. 27. Hereafter referred to as Farmer.

³ Kenneth Stampp. *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South*. (New York: Knopf, 1956) p. 383. Hereafter referred to as Stampp.

⁴ Farmer, p. 124

Declaration of Independence statement that “all men are created equal”.⁵ Others were jealous of the South’s increasing economic power. Few believed in the genuine equality of whites and blacks. The movement was spearheaded by Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave, and William Lloyd Garrison, who founded *The Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper that spread awareness about the institution.

The insistence and ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude of most abolitionists agitated the South, who viewed their protests as an attack on their lifestyle and economy. The issue of abolitionism came to the forefront of discussion in 1852, when Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel depicted the cruelty and injustice of slavery, where slaves were “subject to the control of a vulgar, narrow-minded, tyrannical master.”⁶ and went on to sell more than two million copies in the US alone. By illustrating the horrors of slavery in such an accessible format, more Northerners held sympathy for slaves.⁷ Southerners were outraged at the depiction of slavery in the book, claiming it was exaggerated.⁸ Although Abraham Lincoln reportedly called Stowe “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war”⁹, most historians agree that her novel had little responsibility for triggering the war. Having said this, it did make the debate about slavery more prevalent not just in America, but in British society too.¹⁰

Charles Beard argued that extremist abolitionists only heightened tensions between the free and slave states, branding them as “agitators”.¹¹ John Brown was perhaps the most divisive of them. His raid at Harper’s Ferry understandably terrified Southerners. What aggravated them more, however, was the reverence with which Brown’s actions were received in the North.¹² The *Kansas Herald of Freedom* wrote that “insurrection is one of the noble and Heaven-ordained means of advancing the freedom of the African race”. Abolitionists considered Brown to be a martyr, even comparing him to Jesus.¹³

⁵ Farmer, p. 29

⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. (Houghton Mifflin, 1889) p. 84

⁷ James McPherson. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) p. 89. Hereafter referred to as McPherson.

⁸ “British Philanthropy and American Slavery” *De Bow’s Review*. Mar. 3rd 1853, Volume 14 – Issue 3. p. 258-280

⁹ McPherson, p. 90

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.89

¹¹ Hugh Tulloch. *The Debate on the American Civil War Era*. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999) p. 77. Hereafter referred to as Tulloch.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 77.

¹³ “The Martyr-Roll of the Present”. *Kansas Herald of Freedom*. Dec. 17th 1859, Number 22 – Volume 5. p. 2

This view may have been typical of abolitionists, but was not overall reflective of the general views of most Northerners. Most people in the North were more concerned with nativist issues like immigration and Catholicism, as slavery was mostly confined to the South and Northerners had less experience of it.

Abolitionism often had the opposite of the desired effect; instead of convincing Southerners of slavery's evils, their constant attacks seemed to make Southerners even more defensive of their peculiar institution:

“It is a singular fact, that while the anti-slavery sentiment at the North seems daily to increase in virulence and intensity, the South, on the other hand, is becoming more unanimous in approving the very principle of slavery, and justifying the system as a valuable social and political institution.” – De Bow's Review ¹⁴

The case of Dred Scott again brought the discussion of slavery to the forefront of US politics. Scott was a slave who attempted to sue for his own freedom. The Supreme Court not only denied Scott his freedom, but ruled that black Americans did not have the same rights as white Americans. Abolitionists were outraged and more persuaded of the 'slave power conspiracy'.¹⁵ Douglass noted in a speech: “Step by step we have seen the slave power advancing; poisoning, corrupting, and perverting the institutions of the country; growing more and more haughty, imperious, and exacting.”¹⁶

The issue of states' rights was also related to slavery. Southerners in particular were loyal to their state rather than the Union as a whole. The South were allowed to govern their own states without federal intervention, until the North tried to interfere in territories and their right to slavery. In response to this Northern threat, John Calhoun issued the 'Platform of the South'. He argued that since territories belonged to all of the states, settlers had the right to bring their 'property' there without federal involvement. Therefore any law that tried to change this was 'nullified'. Both Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens wrote that the South seceded over the principle of the North violating their rights to slaves. South Carolina,

¹⁴ *De Bow's Review*, June 1856, Volume 20 – Issue 6, p 645-670a

¹⁵ McPherson, p. 179

¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, “The Dred Scott Decision”. *Speeches by Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Folkways Records, 1977)

the first state to secede, wrote in their Declaration of Secession that their motivation for leaving the Union was growing Northern interference in their right to slavery:

“He is to be entrusted with the administration of the common government, because he has declared that “Government cannot endure half slave, half free,” and that the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction.”¹⁷

Slavery brought about the war by dividing the country into two; slave states and free states. The differences in Northern and Southern opinions created tensions that would eventually culminate in the war. Its controversial nature was summarised in a speech by Charles Sumner, who said that slavery was so divisive that the country was no longer united: “Between Slavery and Civilisation there is an essential incompatibility. If you are for the one, you cannot be for the other; and just in proportion to the embrace of Slavery is the divorce from Civilisation.”¹⁸

¹⁷ “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Union” *Civil War*. Web. 30 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-overview/statesrights.html?referrer=https://www.google.co.uk/>>

¹⁸ Charles Sumner, “The Barbarism of Slavery”, *The Potter Journal*, June 28th 1860, Volume XII – Number 41, p. 1

Chapter II - Expansionism

From the beginnings of the United States, settlers tried to gain as much land as possible, motivated by the philosophy of a 'Manifest Destiny' – the idea that it was their God-given duty to claim land and to 'civilise' the west.¹⁹ However, this was an excuse often used by Southerners to disguise their real intention – the expansion of slavery. By expanding slavery, young Southerners could settle in the newly acquired land and create their own plantations. This continued as the country expanded westwards and states were admitted one by one after acquiring territorial status. This situation, however, provoked much conflict between the Northern and Southern states. The free states and slave states had to be balanced in number or else one half would worry that the other had too much power.

This situation first occurred in 1819 regarding the admission of Missouri into the Union, but was resolved by the 1820 Missouri Compromise; Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine was admitted as a free state to placate the North. It was also ruled that any state south of latitude 36° 30' would be slave-holding; any north of it would be free. The Missouri Compromise seemed to appease both sides for several years; states were admitted in pairs to maintain the balance.²⁰

The land of Texas had great potential, most importantly because of its vast area, with the prospect of thousands of plantations. Northerners were opposed to its annexation; they feared provoking war with Mexico and were concerned about the expansion of slavery and the admission of more slave states, exacerbated by the fact Texas could have been split into several slave states. President Tyler annexed Texas in 1844, which was followed by the Mexican War two years later. The war provoked yet more sectionalism in the US, as Northerners opposed it but Southerners and Westerners supported it, as well as adding fuel to the 'slave-power' conspiracy.²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson made the prediction that "the United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows the arsenic, which brings him

¹⁹ Farmer, p. 13

²⁰ McPherson, p. 51

²¹ Ibid, p. 8

down in turn. Mexico will poison us.”²² The political arguments that rose from the Mexican War and its outcome highlighted the differences between the North and South.

The strife over the expansion of the country escalated, especially after the introduction of Wilmot’s Proviso, which ruled that any territory gained through the war with Mexico could not contain slavery. As James McPherson argued, the war changed the politics of the US in the mid-century. In a weak effort to preserve the Union, President Taylor suggested admitting California and New Mexico as free states, believing that slavery would be more likely to survive if the discussion of slavery in territories stopped. The debate over California and New Mexico was to become pivotal.

The 1850 Compromise was a tipping point in the future of the US. The proposals were so controversial that they could only be passed individually. It ruled that California would be admitted as a free state and New Mexico would remain a territory without restrictions on slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act was introduced, which allowed slaveholders to recapture ex-slaves who had escaped to free states. Although the Compromise prevented immediate secession, it ultimately failed to please anybody, leaving both Northerners and Southerners angered. After this resolution, Salmon Chase said “The question of slavery has been avoided. It has not been settled.”²³ David Potter agreed that the Compromise was not really a compromise and was a futile attempt to fix long-term problems.²⁴

In the 1850s, the question of Kansas and Nebraska’s admission to the Union became more problematic as more settlers moved there. Undecided as to whether they should be free or slave-holding, northern Democrat Stephen Douglas proposed that the problem be resolved using ‘popular sovereignty’, the concept that the settlers living in these states would vote in elections to decide. However, this seemingly democratic idea contradicted the Missouri Compromise, resulting in outrage from the North.²⁵ Chase branded it ‘a criminal betrayal of rights’ because legally Kansas and Nebraska were too far north to hold slaves.

Arguments within Kansas between pro-slavers and anti-slavers intensified quickly when the elections were introduced. Southerners tried to illegally influence these elections by crossing into Kansas to vote. The government in Kansas became exclusively composed of pro-slavers.

²² McPherson, p.51

²³ Ibid, p.76

²⁴ David Potter & Don E. Fehrenbacher. *The Impending Crisis: America before the Civil War: 1848 – 1861*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976) p. 120. Hereafter referred to as Potter.

²⁵ McPherson, p. 124

In response, free-soilers set up their own government at Topeka and drafted their own constitution to ban slavery. Violence erupted after a pro-slavery group attacked and destroyed several buildings in Lawrence. John Brown's slaughter of pro-slavers at Pottawatomie Creek only worsened the situation, which came to be known as 'Bleeding Kansas'. The Republican Party took full advantage of the situation, manipulating the press coverage of the events to persuade readers that Southerners were conspiring to extend slavery.²⁶

The issue of expansionism led to increased conflict between the North and South. The situation in Kansas was to act as a microcosm for the violent events between Northerners and Southerners in the following years. However, expansionism would not have been an issue if it hadn't been so closely linked to slavery, as Northerners felt that Southerners only campaigned for expansion of the country in order to expand slavery.

²⁶ McPherson, p.149

Chapter III - The Republican Party

In the mid-nineteenth century, American politics was largely dominated by two political parties – the Whigs and the Democrats. However, Northern Democrats became disillusioned with their party after President Pierce's expansionist policies suggested it had become a Southern party. The Whigs also lost popularity in the North due to their silence on issues like expansionism and the Fugitive Slave Law. This gap in Northern politics offered a real opportunity to alternative parties.

The Know-Nothings were a political party with a primary focus of immigration. Nativism was common in the North, as white Northerners disliked European immigrants who cut labour prices. The Know-Nothings experienced a meteoric rise but this was followed by a crash in popularity when they dropped their anti-Kansas/Nebraska Act stance. There was one group who stood to benefit from the collapse of the Know-Nothings; the Republican Party. By alienating their supporters, the Know-Nothings failed to capitalise on the gap in Northern politics and instead pushed them towards the only viable alternative to the Democrats in the North.

As a rule, the Republicans were generally anti-slavery, although to different degrees. While some supported immediate emancipation, most preferred the idea of containing slavery until it eventually died out. The Republican Party was also united by nativist issues and an opposition to the Democrats. Primarily, however, Republicans were a Northern party, dominated by Northern interests. This was certainly the way they were seen in the South; slaveholders saw them as an immediate danger to slavery. According to McPherson, it was this perceived threat that caused Southerners to question the future of the Union.²⁷ Abraham Lincoln, a fairly obscure politician, won the Republican nomination due to his moderate viewpoints in comparison to most of his peers, such as Sumner and Chase.

Considering the precarious positions of the other parties, it is not altogether surprising that the Republicans won the election. By the time it was approaching, the Democrats were

²⁷ McPherson, p. 230

completely split; Northerners thought their party was becoming increasingly hostile towards them, and Southerners were openly talking of secession. The Constitutional Democrats and the Constitutional Unionists were both fairly weak parties. The North, in particular, only had one real option that could realistically rival the Democrats.

Lincoln won the elections after receiving the most electoral college votes, but with only 40% of all votes cast. The reaction was instantaneous. Northerners were delighted, celebrating the election as a 'revolution'.²⁸ Southerners were outraged, understandably so, since Lincoln wasn't even on the ballot in ten Southern states. Only one month later, South Carolina became the first state to declare secession from the Union²⁹, triggering a chain reaction from other Southern states.

The fact that secession started only a few weeks after Lincoln's election suggests that the Republicans were a major factor in the outbreak of war. However, they were a short-term factor, as the 1860 election symbolised, to many Southerners, growing Northern political dominance. Hugh Tulloch wrote that although Lincoln's election catalysed secession, other more long-term causes were to blame for the war: "Lincoln's election was merely the culmination of decades of growing sectional enmity"³⁰

The rise of the Republicans acted as a short-term cause of the Civil War in that their growing dominance of the US political landscape infuriated Southerners, who viewed the Republicans as a Northern party. Again, it was slavery that created this problem, as it was the party's anti-slavery stance that led to Southerners perceiving them as a threat to their peculiar institution.

²⁸ McPherson, p. 233

²⁹ "Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Union"

³⁰ Tulloch, p. 105

Chapter IV - Sectionalism

The sectional gulf between the North and South was a very significant cause of the war. The North and South were divided by far more than just slavery. The North was economically stronger, and its people were more open to change. On the other hand, the South was a more traditional society, with a nostalgic view of the past.

The terms 'agricultural South' and 'industrial North' are often used to describe the economic landscape in the antebellum era. Although these terms are broad, they are accurate to an extent. The North was undergoing industrialisation in the mid-nineteenth century. The North had more factories, twice as much railway track and was generally a more urban society, with several major towns and cities.³¹ Contrary to this, the South produced only 10% of the country's total manufactured exports and had only one major city. The main reason for the South's lack of industry was their reliance on the plantation industry, as little money was invested into the diversification of the economy. Several Southerners openly criticised this economic scheme, pointing out their inferiority to the North:

"Slavery and nothing but slavery has retarded the progress and prosperity of our portion of the Union ... made us tributary to the North, and reduced us to the humiliating condition of mere provincial subjects in fact, though not in name." – Hilton Rowan Helper³²

Despite this, it is important to consider the economic similarities between the North and the South. Farmer argued that the North and South did have some economic likenesses, particularly in regards to wealth inequalities because the majority of money was held by an elite class, usually plantation owners.³³ Stampf disagreed with Helper that slavery was uneconomical, citing the use of its profits for investments in industrialisation.³⁴

The North and South were also divided in regards to culture and ideology. The North was more ethnically diverse, due to the high number of immigrants from Europe settling there.

³¹ Farmer, p. 19

³² Hilton Rowan Helper. *The Impending Crisis of the South*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1968) p.

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³³ Farmer, p. 18

³⁴ Stampf. p. 398

The South was more homogeneous, as most residents were of British ancestry. As the North was more urban than the South, there was more potential for ideas to spread rapidly, resulting in a more varied culture open to new ideas.³⁵ In terms of religion, most people in both the North and South were Protestants. However, Northerners began to reject the concept of predestination and started to believe it was in their power to right injustice, partly explaining why reform movements, such as abolitionism and women's rights, had more sway in the North than the South.³⁶

Despite the many things that divided the US, the North and South were united in many significant ways. They did, as McPherson pointed out, share a common heritage, religion and language. Some historians, like David Potter, argued that other than slavery, the North and South were very similar. Abraham Lincoln himself seemed to agree, writing in a letter to Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens that "You think slavery is right and should be extended; while we think slavery is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us."³⁷

Sectionalism was a significant factor in causing the war, as it split the US into two countries that could no longer be considered a united country. However, slavery was the primary reason for these rising tensions. Potter argued that slavery defined the differences between Northern and Southern culture³⁸: "Slavery was the main reason for the growth of sectionalism; it under-pinned most of – if not all – the other differences between North and South."³⁹

³⁵ Farmer, p. 20

³⁶ McPherson, p. 8

³⁷ "Lincoln's Letter to Stephens". *Civil War Causes*. Viewed Feb. 25, 2016.

<http://www.civilwarcauses.org/aleck.htm>

³⁸ Potter, p. 456

³⁹ Farmer, p. 22

Conclusion

The antebellum era was an immensely complex time, and therefore the war cannot reasonably be attributed to a single cause. Having said this, slavery was arguably the primary cause of the Civil War. Of course, other factors were involved and therefore it would be inaccurate to place sole responsibility on slavery. The question of expansionism further divided Northerners and Southerners, as they could not agree about the future of the country. Sectionalist rifts appeared as the North started to develop and leave behind the agricultural and traditional South. To Southerners, the election of Lincoln and the Republicans symbolised the overwhelming political power of the North, which outweighed that of the South.

Having said this, all of these factors were related to slavery in some way: expansion of the country was synonymous with the expansion of slavery; sectionalism was so prominent because of slavery's polarising nature; Southern states felt threatened by the anti-slavery policies of the Republicans. Above all else, slavery was what divided the country so severely that one half felt they were no longer united with the other. While it was so integral to the society of one, it was detested by the other, who felt that for both moral and economic reasons, it could continue no longer.

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