

Chapter 17

Why do People Fight? The Causes of the Civil War

Abraham Lincoln's election, South Carolina's secession, the firing on Fort Sumter — these events rapidly bursting, one on top of another, were products of a century of conflict which led to the Civil War. The underlying causes of this tragic conflict can be found in the raw nerves of American history, submerged under a century of expansion and growth, but exposed in the bitter fights over tariffs, western lands, constitutional rights, and slavery.

This chapter addresses the problem of sifting out the underlying forces which brought Americans to the battlefield, caused over 600,000 deaths, and ended slavery.

Seven Decades of Conflict

In searching for the Civil War's causes, it may be necessary to look anew at the Constitutional Convention and examine the bitter controversy surrounding the slave trade, the fugitive slave law, and the issue of counting slaves for the purpose of representation and taxation. During the Federalist Era, another set of issues rose to divide the sections. Alexander Hamilton, spokesman for the Northern manufacturers, advocated a strong central government capable of regulating trade, protecting industry from foreign competition, funding the national debt, creating a national bank, and suppressing challenges to Federal authority. Thomas Jefferson became the champion of a Southern party which insisted on curbing the power of the national government and resisting programs designed to enrich the industrial North at the expense of the agricultural South. After a brief period of national unity in the wake of the War of 1812, the fundamental conflict between sections surfaced again. Henry Clay resurrected Hamilton's program, using a carefully devised American System to appeal to the interests of the West as well as the North. In 1819, the struggle to admit Missouri produced what Thomas Jefferson called a firebell in the night, and inflamed sectional passion almost beyond the point of endurance. The conflict persisted over the Bank issue, protective tariffs, and federally-financed internal improvements. Andrew Jackson killed the Bank of the United States with his veto message, and temporarily quieted the spirit of secession with an olive branch compromise tariff and a sword-like Force Act. In the late 1840s, the conflict focused upon the issue of extending slavery, first with the Wilmot Proviso, then with the admission of California, and finally with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Dred Scott decision in 1857 raised the specter in the North of an all slave Union, as Lincoln argued, unless the nation embraced Republican Party principles. When Lincoln's party was elected in 1860, it advocated a halt to the spread of slavery, free land in the West, a protective tariff, and Federally financed internal improvements. The South was then convinced that it had become and would remain a permanent minority. Rather than be governed by this 'black Republican', South Carolina and six other states left the Union. After Confederate soldiers fired on Fort Sumter, four other slave states joined their southern sisters in secession.

This short history of seven decades of surging conflict barely marks the contours of the history which produced the Civil War. In searching for the underlying causes, the reader should seek a *single explanation* that answers several distinctive but interrelated questions:

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1. Why did the North and South struggle to control the territories?

Why was it so important to both sides that new territories come into the Union as free or as slave states? Why couldn't either side simply allow the people living in the new territories to make that decision?

2. Why did the North and South develop distinctly different interpretations of the Constitution?

Why did the North believe the elastic clause gave the central government vast new powers while the South continued to hold, except in the case of protecting the rights of slave owners in the territories, to a state's rights interpretation that would limit Federal powers?

3. Why did the South secede after Lincoln's election?

What was it about Lincoln and the Republican Party and platform that made millions of Southerners feel they could not stay in the Union any longer?

Fourteen Decades of Interpretation

It is possible here to give no more than a brief summary of how different historians have interpreted the causes of the Civil War over the past one-hundred and thirty plus years. Suffice it to say that during and immediately after the war, each side sought explanations that would tend to glorify themselves and discredit the opposition. Thus, Southerners, and Southern historians saw the war as a fight for Southern independence and a defense of the principles of liberty against the consolidation of government power. The North, beginning with Lincoln, saw the war mainly as a crusade to free slaves; a war waged against the ruthless slave power in the name of freedom.

After the turn of the century, historical interpretations tended to reflect a general disillusionment with business influence in American life. Similarly, the Civil War was stripped of its idealistic coloration and was seen more and more as a contest between Northern businessmen and Southern planters for control of the central government. Louis Hacker reflected the full blossoming of this interpretation in an article written for Harper's Magazine in the 1930's. Slavery and states rights, Hacker argued, were less important than such economic issues as the tariff, the bank, land distribution, and internal improvements. The South seceded after Lincoln's election because it had lost the contest to control the central government.

This economic interpretation was seriously challenged in the 1930's by a group of historians who concluded that a clash between industrial and agrarian interests was not inevitable. Influenced by anti-war sentiment prior to World War II and by studies indicating that slavery was ready to die a natural

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death, these historians concluded that the Civil War was a ‘needless,’ ‘repressible,’ or ‘avoidable’ conflict. Its cause, according to historian James Randall, was the fanatic leadership of a ‘blundering generation’ – die-hard abolitionists on one hand, and irreconcilable secessionists on the other, who were unable and unwilling to compromise their differences.

Other interpretations of the Civil War have also been put forth, and older interpretations have recently won new advocates. One school of historians has stressed the distinctive nature of the two societies which developed in the North and the South, each with its own economic, social, and political-ideological system. The causes of the war were consequently seen as rooted in these deep-seated cultural differences. With the blossoming of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950’s and 60’s, historians once again turned their attention to moral issues and found that slavery was responsible for the Civil War. Finally, historians more familiar with psychological theory, have shown how the actions of both North and South tended to confirm the worst suspicions each had of the other. This provoked ever more aggressive behavior, and eventually escalated into full-fledged conflict. Each of these three interpretations, the cultural, the moral, and the mutual suspicions, have made important contributions to an understanding of the causes of the Civil War.

One way to understand the causes of the Civil War is to reduce them to very human dimensions and to ask: why do people fight? Hence, the title of this chapter and the headings for each selection from the writings of notable historians who have thought long and hard about the causes of the Civil War.

People Fight Because They Differ Over Deeply Held Ideas

a. Slavery as a Cause of the Civil War

By the late 1850’s, it had become a standard part of Republican rhetoric to accuse the slave power of a long series of transgressions against northern rights and liberties and to predict that, unless halted by effective political action, the ultimate aim of the conspiracy – the complete subordination of the national government to slavery and the suppression of northern liberties – would be accomplished. . . . At the same time, the notion of a black Republican conspiracy to overthrow slavery and southern society had taken hold in the South. These competing conspiratorial outlooks were reflections, not merely of sectional “paranoia,” but of the fact that the nation was, every day, growing apart and into two societies whose ultimate interests were diametrically opposed. The South’s fear of black Republicans, despite its exaggerated rhetoric, was based on the realistic assessment that at the heart of Republican aspirations for the nation’s future was the restriction and eventual eradication of slavery. And the slave power expressed northerners’ conviction, not only that slavery was incompatible with basic democratic values, but that to protect slavery, southerners were determined to control the federal government and use it to foster the expansion of slavery. . . .⁷⁷

b. States Rights as a Cause of the Civil War

The conflict in principle arose from different and opposing ideas as to the nature of what is known as the General Government. The contest was between those who held it to be strictly federal in its character, and those who maintained that it was thoroughly National. It was a strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation, on the other. . . .

⁷⁷ Carl M. Degler, *Out of the Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1959, pp. 182-83

It is the fashion of many writers of the day to class all who opposed the consolidationists in this, their first step, as well as all who opposed them in all their subsequent steps, on this question, with what they style the Pro-Slavery Party. No greater injustice could be done any public men, and no greater violence be done to the truth of History than such a classification. Their opposition to that measure, or kindred subsequent ones, sprung from no attachment to Slavery; but from their strong convictions that the Federal Government had no rightful or Constitutional control or jurisdiction over such questions; and that no such action, as that proposed upon them could be taken by Congress without destroying the elementary and vital principles upon which the Government was founded.⁷⁸

People Fight Over Pocketbook Issues: Economics as a Cause of the Civil War

The Civil War was nothing less than a conflict between two different systems of economic production; and with the victory at the Presidential polls in 1860 of the highest order, the young industrial capitalism of the North and Middle West, a counter-revolutionary movement was launched by the defenders of the lower order, the slave lords of the South.

The contest was being waged on a number of fronts: the South, of course, was hostile to the extension of free farming into the territories because free farming could be more profitably operated, economically speaking, than slave – hence its bitter opposition to a homestead law; it sold its cotton in a world market and wanted to buy its necessities – hence its refusal to permit the inauguration of a protective tariff system; it was a debtor class and constantly in need of cheap money – hence its willingness to continue State banks having the right of issue; it was local and sectional in its interests – hence it could see no need for the underwriting of a great governmental program of support for internal improvements and railroad building, a program whose financial burden would have to be borne by the whole country and which would succeed only by binding West to North by firmer economic ties. With its control over the instrumentalities of government in the decades before the war, the South was able to frustrate every hope of the industrial capitalists of the North and block their every possible avenue of expansion.

The Republican platform of 1860 and the activities of the Civil War Congresses plainly reveal the true character of the cleavage between the sections that every passing year had only tended to widen. The Republican platform spoke in timid and faltering accents about slavery, but on economic questions its voice rang out loud and clear; it was for a protective tariff, a homestead act, a liberal immigration policy, government subsidies for internal improvements, and a transcontinental railway.⁷⁹

People Fight Because of Deep Seated Differences: Conflicting Cultures as a Cause of the Civil War

It was not simply that slavery, which had been universal, had proved economically unprofitable among the Puritans and to a considerable extent in the Middle Colonies, and thus became chiefly confined to the South. It was that, because of differences in soil and climate, a wholly different sort of life developed in the agrarian South of large plantations from that which developed in the industrial North. The South was not all made up of the Southern gentlemen of legend and of fact any more than the North was all made

⁷⁸ Quoted in Edwin C. Rozwenc, *The Causes of the American Civil War*, D.C. Heath and Co., Boston, 1961, pp. 68-69.

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up of Concord sages. There were many sorts of people in both sections, but in the South they had all pretty much developed a love for a more or less easy-going country life with habits and values of its own, and disliked even when they did not despise, the hustling, shrewd, business type of men in the North. There, on the other hand, the people looked down on the Southern type, which they could not and did not try to understand.

The slave was the working capital of the southerner, it is true, just as cash and credit were the working capital of the Northerner, and the attack of the Abolitionists on the morality of holding slaves as property aroused as much anger in the South as a similar widespread propaganda in the South for the confiscation of Northern bank accounts would have raised in the North. But beyond that the Southerner grew increasingly resentful at having his whole way of life attacked by another section.

By 1859, owing to the admission of new States, there had come to be eighteen free against only fifteen slave States, so that the South had become a minority party in both houses of Congress. . . If ever there was a case for self-determination, it might seem as though that section had a perfect one. After a generation and more of constant attack and of decreasing spiritual unity in the nation, the election of 1860 left the South in the absolute political power of a party which was solely Northern. It is not difficult to see why a large part of the Southern people could see nothing left but peaceable secession.⁸⁰

People Fight Because they are Irrational: Extremism as a Cause of the Civil War

Stripped of false assumptions, the tragedy of the nation in bloody strife from 1861 to 1865 must, in large part, be charged to a generation of well-meaning Americans, who, busy with the task of getting ahead, permitted their shortsighted politicians, their overzealous editors, and their pious reformers to emotionalize real and potential differences of the nation. For more than two decades, these molders of public opinion steadily created the fiction of two distinct peoples contending for the right to preserve and expand their sacred cultures. They awakened new fears and led men to hate. In time a people came to believe that social security, constitutional government, and the freedom of all men were at stake in their sectional differences; that the issues were between right and wrong, good and evil. Opponents became devils in human form. Good men had no choice but to kill and be killed.

Patience is not a characteristic of the extremist. Innocence and virtue excuse him from obedience to objectionable laws, and endow him with the privileges of righteous indignation. So when the democratic process ceased to function, and moderate men stood helpless before the mounting fears and hatred and anger of both sides, Out in Kansas, on the floors of the Senate, at the party conventions, at Harper's Ferry, they translated the threats and challenges of a generation into action.⁸¹

In Conclusion

In their search for the underlying cause of any war, students should not be to the essential similarities underlying the historical process. At bottom, there must be some differences between the two sides that wage war – either economic, ideological, or cultural. These difference lead to conflicts that cause both sides to label the other as evil, morally inferior, or merely wrong. War results when these differences cannot be resolved through peaceful discussion and compromise. Each historian in the above selections placed an emphasis on different underlying factors. None would completely deny that the other factors

⁸⁰ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1932, pp. 250-52.

⁸¹ Avery O. Craven, *The Civil War in the Making, 1815-1860*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, La 1959, pp. 113-15.

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are also important. In selecting an interpretation, the student must decide which of these factors deserve the greatest emphasis. It is a difficult task, but it will heighten your understanding, not only of the causes of the Civil War, but of the historical process.

Suggested Student Exercises:

Note: the following summarizes each of the major interpretations of the causes of the Civil War covered in this chapter

- a. **Slavery** — *as a moral issue; Northerners believing it was wrong and must be stopped; Southerners convinced it was good for the slave as well as for his owner.*
- b. **States' rights** — *basic differences over the role of the Central Government in the lives of people; Southerners believing in the supremacy of State governments and Northerners granting numerous powers to the National government.*
- c. **Economics** — *difference in economic interests of the section; one based on industrial development and dependant on free labor, while the other remained agrarian and dependant on slave labor.*
- d. **Culture** — *similar to economics, but more dependant on people's values and ideas than their direct economic interests.*
- f. **Fanaticism** — *the war was caused by fanatics on both sides who refused to compromise issues that could have been resolved through discussion, reasoning, and listening, rather than shouting, posturing, and taking a moral position on every issue.*

1. Outline an argument (using the interpretation with which you agree) that best explains at *least three* of the following:

- a. *Why the North and South struggled to control the territories.*
- b. *Why the North and South developed distinctly different interpretations of the Constitution (either concerning slavery or the rights of states).*
- c. *Why the South seceded after Lincoln's election.*
- d. *Why you reject one of the other interpretations.*

2. Prepare to write a major essay on what caused the Civil War by writing an introduction stating the problem, developing a thesis statement on what caused the war, and indicating the major arguments you intend to use. Cover at least three of the four points (a-d above).

3. Develop and expand your introduction into an essay of no less than 2000 words. Your essay needs to have:

- a. An introduction that states the problem
- b. A thesis statement
- c. Foreshadowing of your major arguments
- d. A main body of facts and logic which supports the thesis
- e. A conclusion that summarizes the essay's main points.