

Causes of the Civil War: A Balanced Answer

What caused the American Civil War? It is amazing that even today, over 150 years after the Civil War started, there is passionate debate regarding the "cause" of the Civil War. Consider this:

It is a fact that when the armies for the North and South were first formed, only a small minority of the soldiers on either side would have declared that the reason they joined the army was to fight either "for" or "against" slavery.

However, equally true is the statement: "Had there been no slavery, there would have been no war. Had there been no moral condemnation of slavery, there would have been no war." (This was made by Sydney E. Ahlstrom, in his monumental study of religion in America *A Religious History of the American People*, Yale University Press, 1972, on p. 649)

The message here is that the reasons a nation goes to war are usually various and complicated. The American Civil War is no exception.

Background

The curious thing is that although slavery was *the* moral issue of the nineteenth century that divided the political leaders of the land, the average American had very little interest in slaves or slavery. Most Southerners were small farmers that could not afford slaves. Most Northerners were small farmers or tradesmen that had never even *seen* a slave.

But political leaders on both sides were very interested in slaves and slavery. The South's economic system was based upon cotton--and slavery. The political leaders of the South, such as Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama, The Fire-Eaters and Robert Augustus Toombs of Georgia, recognized that if the South lost her slaves (i. e., had to pay slaves wages similar to what white laborers were paid), her entire socio-economic system would probably collapse. Hence any political action that took place that threatened the slavery system of the South received the undivided attention of the South's political leaders, many of whom were themselves slave owners.

Political leaders in the North were much more divided about the slavery issue. Many of the powerful abolitionists, such as William L. Garrison of Massachusetts, were either religious leaders or newspaper editors. A fewer number of abolitionists, such as Senator Edwin Sumner of Massachusetts and Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, were politicians. The north had equally powerful political leaders such as democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas who were either indifferent towards or supportive of slavery.

Today we recognize slavery as a moral issue. But in the early nineteenth century, it was seen as an economic issue first, moral issue second. A series of legislative actions, most notably the Missouri Compromise of 1820, had been enacted by Congress to put limits on the propagation of slavery, but compromise with northern and southern interests was

always kept in mind. The South had an economic interest in the spread of slavery to the new territories so that new slave states could be created and the South's political influence would remain strong. The North had an interest in limiting the spread of slavery into the new territories for both purposes of controlling Southern political power AND support of the moral issue.

Up until the middle 1800s, slavery was kept as a background issue that remained largely the concern of political leaders of the South, and abolitionists of the North. But in 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, sponsored by Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, brought slavery to the forefront of national attention. Kansas-Nebraska eliminated the old Missouri Compromise (which in 1820 had designated areas of the new territories in which slavery could and could not be introduced) and made it possible for slavery to be introduced in virtually *any* new territory. Douglas called the concept of allowing residents of the territories to decide the slavery issue for themselves *Popular Sovereignty*. Kansas-Nebraska caused a firestorm to erupt in the North, awakening many people to the danger of the potential spread of slavery. Moderate politicians such as Abraham Lincoln became active in the cause of fighting both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the spread of slavery.

Conclusion

Although the majority of the American people-- including many moderate politicians like Abraham Lincoln--wanted to avoid Civil War and were content to allow slavery to die a slow, inevitable death, the most influential political leaders of the day were not. On the southern side, "fire-eaters" like Rhett and Yancey were willing to make war to guarantee the propagation of their "right" to own slaves. On the northern side, abolitionists like John Brown and Henry Ward Beecher of Connecticut were willing to make war in order to put an immediate end to the degrading institution of slavery.

These leaders, through either words or action, were able to convince the majority that it was necessary to go to war, and in order to convince them they justified the war with arguments that only *indirectly* referred to the subject of slavery (i.e., state rights et. al.).

Southern politicians convinced their majority that the North was threatening their way of life and their culture. Northern politicians convinced their majority that the South, if allowed to secede, was really striking a serious blow at democratic government. In these arguments, both southern and northern politicians were speaking the truth--but not "the whole truth." They knew that to declare the war to be a fight over slavery would cause a lot of the potential soldiers of both sides to refuse to fight.

So-was the war about slavery? Absolutely. If there had been no disagreement over the issue of slavery, the South would probably not have discerned a threat to its culture and the southern politicians would have been much less likely to seek "their right to secede." But was it only about slavery? No. It was also about the constitutional argument over states' rights and whether or not a state had a right to leave the Union, which was of primary concern to most southern soldiers, as well as a continuation of antebellum southern culture, over against what they viewed as a tyrannical encroachment of the

Federal government in attempting to take away their rights as individuals to pursue their agricultural careers free from abusive and unfair taxes and regulations that punished the Southern farmer in favor of the Northern industrialist. This is much the same that we see today with the struggle of Right to Work states over against the corrupt, Federally subsidized, and tyrannical Unions that want to dominate in a type of Marxist fashion, with the current situation in Washington State with the Unions there attempting to block Boeing's move to South Carolina, a Right to Work state. Thus, although the vast majority of Southerners had little interest in slaves, the right to own or not own slaves was a concern to many Southern politicians as slavery was a key factor in the Southern economy. Thus, it was the very wealthy land owners who owned slaves, and thus who a great deal of political influence, who were pushing the slavery issue as one aspect of state rights in their desire for independence from the North. In fact, in 1850, out of a population of 6,000,000 adult, white males in the South, only 347,525 owned slaves (5.8 % of adult, white males); half of these (173, 760) owned from five up to 100 slaves (2.9 % of adult, white males); the remaining half owned from one to four slaves (2.9 % of adult, white males); and less than 1800 owned 100 or more slaves (.0003 % of adult, white males) (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 15th ed. s.v. "United States of America," 227). Thus, less than 6 % of adult, white males in the South were slave owners when the Civil War began, but it was those very few who were the large land holders and slave owners that were pushing the slavery issue, but that was not what over 90 % of Southern who fought were fighting for – they were fighting against what they saw as Northern aggression – they were indeed fighting for their rights as United States citizens to pursue their individual state's rights against what they saw then as a tyrannical and overreaching Federal Government, much as we see today as I described above. Slavery had to come to an end, and men such as Robert E. Lee and Thomas Jackson ("Stonewall") knew that as well (Jackson himself countermanding slave laws in VA), and, as stated above, they were not fighting for the continuation of slavery, but for individual state's rights, as was my great-grandfather, Hardy C. Gill, who himself was opposed to the continuation of slavery, and he had the privilege of fighting with both of these great generals, who were also very committed Christians.

This has been my attempt at providing a brief, balance answer to a complicated subject which has been the subject of many books. For further reading, I suggest Kenneth Stampp's *Causes of the Civil War*.

<http://www.civilwarhistory.com/slavetrade/causes.htm#abominations>

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/confederatecauses.htm>

<http://blueandgraytrail.com/features/southerncauses.html>