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American History 1860-1990

8 The Causes of the Civil War: Conclusion

In March 1865 Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, presented a succinct explanation of how and why the war came:

On the occasion corresponding this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war ... One eighth of the whole population was coloured slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localised in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.

For 50 years after the war, few Northern historians dissented from this view. However, Jefferson Davis insisted in his memoirs, written in the 1870s, that the Southern states had fought solely 'for the defence of an inherent, unalienable right ... to withdraw from a Union which they had, as sovereign communities, voluntarily entered ... The existence of African servitude was in no wise the cause of the conflict, but only an incident'. This explanation was accepted by many Southerners who continued to view the conflict as a war of Northern aggression. 'Progressive' historians in the 1920s claimed that the war was a contest, not between slavery and freedom, but between plantation agriculture and industrialising capitalism. In the 1940s revisionist historians denied that sectional conflicts were genuinely divisive. They pointed out that Northerners and Southerners shared the same language, political culture, religious values, and racist views. Revisionists insisted that the differences separating North and South could have been accommodated peacefully. Far from being irrepressible, the Civil War was brought on by extremists – abolitionists and fire-eaters – who whipped up emotions and hatreds. The passions they aroused got out of hand because politicians failed to find a compromise. The result, claimed revisionists, was a tragic, unnecessary war.

Historiography has now come full circle. The state rights, progressive, and revisionist schools are dormant if not dead. The view that slavery was 'somehow' the cause of the war is now almost universally accepted. Slavery was the sole institution not shared by North and South. It defined the South, permeating almost every aspect of its life. The rise of militant abolitionism in the North exacerbated tension between the sections. But it was the issue of slavery expansion, rather than the mere existence of slavery, that polarised the nation. Most of the crises that threatened the bonds of Union arose

THE COMING OF WAR: 1860-61

- 1860 Lincoln elected President (November);
South Carolina seceded (December);
- 1861 Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana seceded (January);
Texas seceded: establishment of the Confederacy (February);
Lincoln inaugurated President (March);
Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter (April);
Virginia seceded (April);
Arkansas and North Carolina seceded (May);
Tennessee seceded (June).

over this matter. Convinced that a Slave Power conspiracy was at work, Northerners came to support the Republican Party, which was pledged to stop slavery expansion. For many Southerners the election of a Republican president in 1860 was the last straw – an affront to their honour. So, the lower South seceded.

In 1861 Lincoln was not pledged to end slavery: he was pledged to preserve the Union. The Confederate states were fighting for the right to self-determination. Thus nationalism became the central issue of the struggle. Secession by the Confederate states need not have led to war. The North could have let the Southern states go. But most Northerners were prepared to fight to save the Union. The fire-eaters, who wanted to create a Southern nation, were a distinct minority pre-1860. Most Southerners saw themselves as loyal Americans. The establishment of the Confederacy was a refuge to which many Southerners felt driven, not a national destiny that they eagerly embraced. The Civil War did more to produce Southern nationalism than Southern nationalism did to produce war. In so far as there was a sense of Southern nationalism in 1860–61, it had arisen because of slavery. Slavery set the South apart from the rest of the nation. Differences arising from the slavery issue impelled the Southern states to secede. While the Confederacy might claim its justification to be the protection of state rights, it was primarily one state right, the right to preserve slavery, that impelled secession.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Southerners got things wrong. Slavery was not in immediate peril in 1860–61. Some Southerners realised the enormity of the mistake. Governor Houston of Texas observed: 'Our people are going to war to perpetuate slavery and the first gun fired in the war will be the knell of slavery'. The North, so much stronger in terms of both men and industrial strength, was always likely to win a Civil War. The fact that this was not obvious to most Southerners is symptomatic of the hysteria that swept the South in 1860–61. Southerners picked the quarrel. They fired the first shots. As a result, one in four white male Southerners of military age died and slavery – the institution which the South had gone to war to defend – ended.

▼ Working on The Causes of the American Civil War

In trying to work out what caused anything in history, it is always useful to consider:

- ▼ What were the main long-term causes (preconditions)?
- ▼ What were the main medium-term causes (precipitants)?
- ▼ What were the main short-term causes (triggers)?