**The Causes of the American Civil War**

**Taking a historiographical angle, Marcus Cunliffe describes how, in 1861, the American federal experiment broke down, and there ensued the greatest and most hard-fought of modern wars before that of 1914.**

[**Marcus Cunliffe**](https://www.historytoday.com/author/marcus-cunliffe) | Published in [History Today](https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/latest) [Volume 3 Issue 11 November 1953](https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-today/volume-3-issue-11-november-1953)



**Bombardment of Fort Sumter by Currier & Ives (1837–1885).**

The facts – or some of them – are plain enough. In the small hours of April 12th, 1861, Confederate guns opened fire on Fort Sumter, at the mouth of Charleston harbour, in South Carolina. The Federal garrison of the fort surrendered late the next day; and the Civil War began its bitter, four-year course: North against South, blue uniforms versus grey. When the Southern batteries began the bombardment, the sectional pattern was already fairly clear. Seven Southern states – South Carolina, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Georgia – had seceded from the Union. After the seizure of Fort Sumter, they were joined in the same month by four more states – Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas. This block of eleven states formed the Southern Confederacy. In all eleven, slavery was a recognized institution. Another four slave states – Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware – hung in the balance; as it happened, they did not secede.

The American experiment in federal republicanism had apparently broken down. The immediate reason for secession was the success of Abraham Lincoln in the presidential election of the previous November. He was, the South insisted, a sectional president, the nominee of the 'Black Republicans.' His candidacy had not even been acknowledged by 10 of the 11 Confederate states, in which he had not therefore received a single vote. Nor had he carried any of the doubtful border states. He owed his election to northern votes; and only 40 per cent of the total popular vote had gone to him. The national two-party structure of Whig and Democrat had collapsed, the Whig party disappearing altogether while the Democrats split into northern and southern wings. It was the culmination of forty years of disagreement between free and slave states. Common and cumulative exasperation reached a climax at which men were ready to settle their issues by force.

These are a few of the simple facts. The interpretation to be put upon them, however, is not a simple matter. Long before the war, a voluminous literature of controversy was in being. Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is*; Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and such Southern replies as Mrs. Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*); the files of abolitionist papers like Garrison's Liberator, which had an effect out of all proportion to their small circulation; the Southern theorizing of Calhoun, Fitzhugh and others; the innumerable articles in newspapers and in magazines; the endless speeches at political meetings and in Congress; the massive record of judicial opinion – these were only part of the paper bombardment that anticipated the armed assault at Sumter. While the war was in progress argument continued, and has done ever since. For some time after the war, the main assumptions of Northern historians were that slavery was a moral wrong; that secession was unconstitutional; and that, having been provoked into belligerence by the 'Slave Power,' the North saved the Union by its hard-won victories. The Southern answer – as couched by the Confederacy's president and vice-president, Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens – was that the South had legitimate grievances against the North. Its 'peculiar institution' was threatened, its needs ignored or thwarted, its wealth appropriated by Northern merchants and through iniquitous tariffs. In the circumstances, they contended, the South was legally and morally justified in seeking to sever its connections with the North. It failed in attempting what the colonies of 1776 achieved: namely, in asserting the right to independence, against an alien and irksome system of government.

In the last half-century, explanations of the sectional conflict have been a good deal modified. Economic interpretations have been offered that present the situation as a clash between a primarily industrial North and a primarily agrarian South: between merchant and planter, Wall Street and King Cotton. Other historians have stressed the importance of the West as a region over which North and South competed for control. Others again have questioned not only whether the war was worth while, but whether it was inevitable. Seward's famous phrase of 1858 – that the struggle represented 'an irrepressible conflict' – has been countered by such historians as Avery Craven, whose *The Repressible Conflict* (1939) and *The Coming of the Civil War* (1942) assert that, despite serious sectional hostility, the actual war could have been averted. In an article entitled 'A Blundering Generation' (1940), the late James G. Randall also says that measures short of armed conflict could have been taken, if only Southern fire-eaters and Northern abolitionists had been less intransigent, and if political leaders had shown greater wisdom. Several recent writers, Randall among them, have discussed the unreality of the terms of argument. North and South, in the well-known words of James G. Blaine, were worried over 'an imaginary negro in an impossible place.' That is, they squabbled over the extension of slavery in the Western territories, where the soil and terrain were quite unsuited to a slave economy based on cotton or any other staple crop. In Kansas, for instance, which had been the scene of bloody strife between free-soil Northerners and Southern defenders of slavery, the 1860 census showed a white population of 106,390; free coloured inhabitants numbered 266, and negro slaves a mere two. There was an added irony in the fact that Kansas was admitted to the Union in 1861 by a Republican (and hence free-soil) Congress without any stipulation as to slavery. Such statistics help to reinforce the argument that the Civil War was the product of what one historian has called 'hyperemotional-ism.' Why fight over a dying institution? Before the 1830s, many Southerners were prepared to agree with their Northern compatriots that slavery was an anachronism. Not until the abolitionists attacked slavery did the South begin to invent justifications for slave-holding, and to retaliate by attacking Northern (and British) wage-slavery. Again, it has been pointed out that only a small minority of Southerners owned slaves; the greater number were modest farmers, poor men like the luckless five whom John Brown judicially murdered at Pottawatomie, Kansas, one Sunday in May 1856.

For many historians, then, the view of the Civil War as a crusade against the evil of slavery has no validity. Nor do many today explain it entirely as an economic struggle. Perhaps the most popular and sophisticated version of it is as the outcome of fanaticism combined with political inefficiency. Thus, it can be plausibly maintained that, if the crisis of 1860-61 had been tided over like the earlier ones, then since slavery was out of date – the institution could have been peaceably terminated. Tsarist Russia emancipated the serfs in 1861 (the Emancipation Edict appeared the day before Lincoln's inauguration); allowed a little more time – say as much as Brazil, which took the final step to free its slaves in 1888 – could not the Southern states have freed theirs?

In the historiography so briefly sketched here, it will be noticed that on the whole the Southern side has had the better of the dispute. Even the negative interpretations, which reproach both sides, by implication reproach the North more than the South. It was, we are told, the abolitionists who provoked the South into deciding that slavery was 'a positive good': it was Sumner of Massachusetts whose taunts caused Preston Brooks of South Carolina to thrash him with a cane, as he sat at his desk in the Senate: it was John Brown at Harper's Ferry who alarmed the South by trying to foment a slave insurrection. Or, leaving aside the question of provocation, a number of historians have strengthened the Southern case by agreeing that the South was by 1861 virtually a separate nation, with its own set of values. This is, of course, not a new argument – it was familiar to both sides, before the war – but it has been given fresh emphasis by Rollin G. Osterweis and others. If the South felt itself to be a separate nation, why should it be bound by Northern commercial or cultural standards?

'Perhaps,' says Mr. Osterweis, 'the failure of the Northern leaders, between November, 1860, and April, 1861, to recognize that they were dealing with a rising tide of Southern nationalism accounts, in part, for their optimism and inactivity during those fateful months.' Somehow, one sees, the North is at fault. So is it according to an able account by Kenneth M. Stampp, who concludes:

*Yankees went to war animated by the highest ideals of the 19th-century middle classes, but they waged their war in the usual spirit of vengeance. Perhaps it was that spirit which ultimately tarnished their cause... . Perhaps it was the limitations of their social philosophy, which allowed the conflict to end with the rich richer and the slaves only half free... The most striking products of their crusade were the shoddy aristocracy of the North and the ragged children of the South. Among the masses of Americans there were no victors, only the vanquished.*

It is true that now and then a recent historian has handled the South roughly. Herbert Aptheker, a Marxist, has maintained (in his *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 1944) John Brown's was no idle threat. In his view, the negro population of the slave states was seething with discontent, and in spite of rigid supervision did stage dozens of abortive insurrections. It is true also that both Northern and Southern historians of the present time usually make commendable efforts to be fair. Nevertheless, the current tendency is – in suggesting that the war was a tragic error – to allot responsibility more readily to the North than to the South.

How satisfactory are these recent 'revisionist' approaches? Perhaps we can agree that they offer useful evidence as to the confusion of motive and event in 'antebellum' America. There was undoubtedly political confusion of a disastrous sort. Roy F. Nichols remarks that, in the America of 1856, there were at least two parties in each of the 31 states, and three (Democrat, American and Republican) in 16 of them: so that there were 78 'practically independent state organizations, uniting into three national aggregations only for presidential campaign purposes,' each moulded by complex 'local attitudes and prejudices ... internal rivalries and struggles for leadership.' By 1860, when there were four major groups each with its presidential candidate, the situation was still more chaotic. Even within the relatively unified Republican party, there was a wide variety of issues. If New England Republicans were chiefly interested in Americanism, temperance and opposition to slavery-extension, party-members in New Jersey and Pennsylvania were concerned primarily with the tariff; while in California the principal issues were the Pacific railway, the overland mail service, and the personal feud between Senators Gwin and Broderick over patronage. There was a final, fatal confusion during the hiatus between Lincoln's election in November 1860 and his inauguration four months later. And the errors and scandals of the first year of the war would seem to bear out the picture of a cumbersome political system strained beyond endurance.

Indeed, the whole panorama of collapse recalls the comment of Samuel Butler that America was too big, and should have been discovered gradually, in pieces about as big as France or Germany. As Dixon Wecter has observed, it takes only a minor typographical error to turn the United States into the Untied States. Political confusion may appear as merely a symptom of a larger malady. The question then arises, not as to why the Union broke in 1861 but why it did not break earlier. Whitman wrote of his country in 1875 that 'the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me.' Such a fear had been present at the back of American minds ever since the formation of the Union. John Quincy Adams, for example, had told a friend in 1801 that 'I look to the Union of our country as to the sheet anchor of our hopes, and to its dissolution as to the most, dreadful of our dangers.' Again and again in his lifetime he echoed this conviction. So did countless other Americans, in conversation, at political dinners, on July 4th rallies. Behind their words there was a trace of the anxiety voiced by Emerson in 1847, when he described America as

*'the ungirt, the diffuse, the profuse, procumbent. ... It all runs to leaves, to suckers, to tendrils, to miscellany.' America, he said, 'seems to have immense resources ... but it is a village littleness – village squabble and rapacity characterize its policy. It is a great strength on a basis of weakness.'*

The centrifugal, disrupting energies of the huge country were offset, as far as possible and with a quite deliberate self-consciousness, by the constant appeal to the American Union, 'now and forever, one and inseparable.' By the 1850s, one might argue, the Union was an abstraction that threatened to evaporate. In its place, men looked for something nearer at hand, more easily grasped: in the case of Robert E. Lee – attached neither to slavery nor secession, a Southern soldier offered command of the Federal forces – the nearer something was his native state of Virginia. One can understand his decision, when so much else seemed uncertain.

For what *was* America? Or what were its 'North,' 'West' and 'South'? With each decennial census their bounds had shifted. Within each, there were many differences and dissensions. Illinois and Indiana, though-free states, were as divided over the problem of the negro as was the slave state of Missouri. Other slave states were tom by doubt. Western Tennessee disagreed with the eastern part of the state. In Lee's own Virginia, the western counties (where Stonewall Jackson came from) dissociated themselves from the secession ordinance and eventually formed the free state of West Virginia. In Boston, the home of the Liberator, abolitionism was highly unpopular until the very eve of the Civil War. In New York City, many businessmen had Southern connections; and the immigrant press there showed little humanitarian enthusiasm: the *Irish American*, for instance, announced in October 1853 that it was,

*'for the Union and nothing but the Union; ... against all the devils of Abolitionism, Freesoil ... and every other humbug which the fermentation of bad passions or party purposes is capable of vomiting upon the surface of society.'*

And what did Lincoln himself think were the purposes of the war? Though he debated strenuously with the Democratic leader Stephen Douglas, in 1858, he shared most of Douglas's beliefs. He admitted that he did not consider a negro to be the equal of a white man; and when the war was in progress, he confessed that he would willingly preserve slavery as an institution if by so doing he could preserve the Union. Mary Lincoln, his wife, was a Southerner, with no less than seven close relatives attached to the Confederate cause.

There is enough confusion here, one might think, to show that while the dissolution of the Union – though regrettable – made some sense, the war that followed was needless. But all wars involve hideous calamity, and civil wars have a special element of heartbreak. To say that, and to concede also that wars are not an ideal way of settling disputes, is not to prove that the American Civil War was solely the product of muddle and ill-temper.

Indeed, the reasons for disunion, *if we exclude slavery*, are not convincing. To begin with, sectional rivalries and national loosenesses do not necessarily lead to the shattering of a country's unity. (James G. Randall and other 'revisionists' have been at pains to point this out.) Agricultural and industrial areas may have little comprehension of one another's problems: they may even despise one another: but they also need each other, as the Southern planter was the complement of the Northern merchant. One region does not decide to isolate itself entirely from another because it has some grievances. America's framework, as Emerson suggested, was untidy and local: but it was not inherently sectional. Indeed, its very untidiness was a sign of the 'great strength' he also recognized. It expanded westward at a tremendous rate – 17 miles a year, on the average, as Tocqueville noted in the 1830s. With the rest of America, the South shared in the process. While the North took in such new states as Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), Michigan (1837), Iowa (1846) and Wisconsin (1848), the South embraced states no less new and no less raw: Mississippi (1817), Alabama (1819), Arkansas (1836), Florida and Texas (1845). In most respects these new states had more in common with one another than with, say, South Carolina or Massachusetts. In them all, the work of the frontier had to be done – Indians dispossessed, land claimed and settled, homes and townships built. The new states, North or South, were – in other words – also part of the West, with that region's characteristic pioneering attitudes. And in their different ways, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, born not far from one another in Kentucky, both belong to the West, as much as to North or South, though one came to Illinois and the other to Mississippi. Both families revealed the typical American readiness to pull up stakes and find another home, further west. Avery Craven argues that, in the Old South,

*Houses were built to endure and to serve best the accidents of good living. Lands were not for sale and did not constitute a capital investment on which a known percentage of interest had to be realized. They were merely foundations on which a home, a way of life, was to be erected, a source from which a living, on established levels, might be expected without too much worry and without an undue amount of fighting.*

There is a measure of truth in this statement, as applied to the older slave states. But it is surely too static a vision of life in the newer states. If 'lands were not for sale,' etc., how were Alabama or Arkansas so vigorously opened up? We must beware also of exaggerating the contrasts offered by the older free and slave states. Though the latter were more agrarian in outlook than the former, these Northern states likewise constituted a flourishing agricultural region, much less given over to commerce and industry than some Southern apologists would allow.

The point we are establishing is this: *without slavery*, the 'South' would have been a geographical expression, not the label of a *soi-disant* separate nationality. To explain the sectional conflict, we must come back to the central issue of slavery. No matter how many qualifications we make, negro slavery, is still the ultimate cause of the war. It is important that the slaves were negroes; if they had been American Indians, or any other group whose colour was fairly inconspicuous, there would not have been the problem of assimilation. In this sense, as Ulrich B. Phillips has claimed, slavery is to be seen as a system of control – an attempted solution to an insoluble difficulty. Yet if there had been no slavery – if, as seemed quite likely in the infant days of the American Republic, all the negroes had been emancipated by about 1830 – then sectional hostility would have been far less acute. There would have been sectional friction – as there had been with New England during the War of 1812, and as there was to be with the Western farmers, later in the century. But there is no reason to suppose that secession or a civil war would have resulted from sectional antipathies. For there would have been no *sections*, as that word is used to describe the South. The effect of slavery was to define the South much more sharply than would otherwise have been possible. Given the one common denominator of slavery, the Southern states, on the defensive, compiled an elaborate mythology of Southern culture that was meant to cover states as disparate as Maryland and Missouri, North Carolina and Texas. Through reiteration, many in the slave states came to believe in the abstraction known as the 'South,' though it was, paradoxically, less real than the wider abstraction known as the 'Union.' The Southern mythology *became truer*, pragmatically, through the experience of defeat in the Civil War. Since then, it has continued to acquire an increasing, retrospective validity. We smile at the old Southern assertion that its region was originally settled by gallant Cavaliers, while the surly and self-righteous Roundheads installed themselves in New England. Nevertheless, as the quotations from Kenneth Stampp and Avery Craven in this article demonstrate, we tend ourselves to accept a somewhat similar view of the Civil War. One might say that the South of 1953 is more solid and more aristocratic than it was in 1853. There is a hint of 'Gentlemen v. Players' in our accounts. Actually, the Civil War was rather a question of the 'South v. The Rest,' since the North as an entity existed only in relation to the 'South'; and the 'South,' like the M.C.C., has gradually gained a prestige and significance to which it once had little title. Each time we speak of the 'South' – and it is such a convenient term that we cannot do without it – we find it still harder to grasp that, *without slavery*, the conception of such an autarchy would be essentially false.

Without slavery, since the South would not have felt itself separate it would not have felt hemmed in and outnumbered. There might have been a certain regional disappointment that the South-eastern states were no longer so powerfully represented in the Federal government. But there would have been no burning resentment. There might have been bickering over the admission of the territories to statehood, or a harmless snobbery about them like that sometimes displayed by New Englanders. But there would have been no deadlock.

The Northern states would have had little occasion to oppose the Mexican War, or southward expansionism in general. The Southern states, for their part, would not have been jealous of expansion along the northern frontiers. Instead, Union sentiment would have been encouraged and intensified – possibly at the expense of Cuba, Mexico and other areas in the American hemisphere. It is even conceivable that instead of splitting apart in civil war, the Union might have expressed its solidarity in the same period through war with Britain, over central America and the territories north of the 49th parallel.

Inside the United States, it is doubtful whether the position of the negro would have been idyllic, given the widespread American reluctance to treat him as an equal who might live next door to a white man and enjoy a comparable wage. Possibly there would have been race-riots, of the kind this century has witnessed. Still, there would not have been a clash over Missouri in 1819-20; there would have been no agitation over the fugitive-slave law, no abolitionist campaigns, no campaigns against abolitionism, no Wilmot Proviso, no crisis in 1850,- no dispute over Kansas-Nebraska in 1854; in short, no reason for a civil war.

The war, when it came, was about negro slavery. Terrible, bloody, even – in some ways – muddled and futile, it was not without meaning. This is not to lay blame on the Southern states, nor on the abolitionists, though both had their faults. The former were right in insisting that slavery was a deep-rooted, difficult issue. The latter were right in asserting that it was a moral issue to which they could not remain indifferent. In the America of the 19th century slavery was, as James G. Randall has said, a 'monstrous anomaly,' as anachronistic and indefensible in its time as *apartheid* is in ours. As such, it came to affect almost every aspect of American life, while arguments grew more extreme, until they focused on the curiously irrelevant and yet vital theorem of slavery in the territories. After the Missouri Compromise was arrived at in 1820, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts had a discussion on the matter with his fellow cabinet-member John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Realizing with dismay how profoundly they disagreed, he recorded the conversation in his diary, adding that 'If the Union must be dissolved, slavery is precisely the question upon which it ought to break.' The Missouri question was, he had written earlier,

*'a mere preamble – a title page to a great tragic volume... . The President [James Monroe] thinks this question will be winked away by a compromise. But so do not I. Much am I mistaken if it is not destined to survive his life and mine.'*

Adams was something of a misanthrope, and not infallibly, accurate in his predictions. But on this point he was not mistaken.