**The Cause’ of the American Civil War**

**By John Spicer**

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American Civil War Military, Political Abraham Lincoln

J***ohn Spicer judges that slavery was the key factor in producing the conflict.***

More than 60 per cent of the electorate did not vote for Abraham Lincoln as President in November 1860, and he won the electoral college vote despite not carrying one Southern state. Lincoln's triumph prompted South Carolina to secede from the Union on 20th December 1860, and his reassurances that the institution of slavery would not be affected where it already existed failed to satisfy the doubts of other Southern states. By the time of his inauguration, six more states from the Lower South - Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas - had left the Union, and the Confederate States of America (CSA) had been set up. Lincoln arrived in Washington having travelled through the slave state of Maryland in disguise in order to avoid possible attack or assassination. A war was about to begin which would leave about as many dead as all of the other wars the USA has fought added together. That war would result in freedom for 4 million black slaves, and secure the future of the Union.

The causes of the American Civil War can perhaps be linked to one particular issue - that of slavery. In December 1860 Lincoln had written to the future vice-president of the Confederate states, Alexander Stephens, and reiterated his public pledge not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, but he also added: ‘I suppose, however, this does not meet the case. You think slavery is right and ought to be extended, while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us.’ Later Stephens himself seemed to confirm the significance of the issue by saying that ‘African slavery ... was the immediate cause of the late rupture’, and stating that the Confederate government was based upon ‘the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery ... is his natural and normal condition.’ South Carolina’s declaration of their reasons for secession cited ‘an increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery.’

It can be argued that slavery played a part in every pre-war crisis, and that even where other factors have been put forward by historians they are in some way linked to slavery. But in many ways the secession of South Carolina was precipitate because Lincoln was in no position to abolish slavery anyway. Following the 1860 elections Lincoln's Republican Party, which opposed the expansion of slavery, did not control either house of Congress. To abolish slavery completely would have required a constitutional amendment, in other words a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress as well as three-quarters of the states to ratify the amendment. In 1860 15 out of the nation's 33 states - or 45 per cent - were slave states which collectively would never have ratified such an amendment. Lincoln could in reality do nothing to touch slavery where it already existed, but moves might be taken to bar slavery from the territories to ensure that all new states joining the Union in the future would be 'free soil'.

The Southern states did not take Lincoln at his word when he said he was opposed merely to the expansion of slavery. Had he not argued that a house divided against itself could not stand? Stephen Douglas, who had run against Lincoln in the 1858 senatorial elections, had pointed out to his rival that 'the divided house' had in fact stood since the writing of the Constitution. Southern states were probably right not to trust Lincoln, because less than two years into the war he issued an Emancipation Proclamation which declared all black slaves in rebel states free. Some have argued that Lincoln intended all along to free the slaves, but he could not afford to tell people lest he lose the support of the four 'border' slave states that remained loyal to the Union throughout the conflict. These four states had much closer ties with the North than other Southern states; and slaveholding, broadly speaking, was less widespread there than further south.

Territorial Expansion and 'Delaying the Inevitable'

Historians often despise the use of the word 'inevitable' when examining the causation of an event. Such cataclysmic events as civil war tend to have a range and diversity of causes, and are rarely entered into lightly. And yet, given expansion in the number of states following the acquisition of huge areas of land, particularly with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the huge area acquired after the Mexican War, the issue of whether territories applying to become new states would be 'pro-slave' or 'free-soil' looked set to continue to rear its head and foment significant conflict. The Founding Fathers too must take their share of the blame for not doing more to deal with what became long-term causes. Such was their desire to create a stronger Union in 1787 that they were prepared to reach an uneasy compromise over the issue of slavery, a compromise, it could be argued, that could not last indefinitely.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 highlighted the dilemma perfectly. Missouri Territory had reached the required population to apply for statehood. In the Senate the number of slave states was equally balanced with the number of free states, and it looked highly likely that Missouri would join as a slave state, thus tipping the balance in the Senate in favour of the South. It can be argued that Henry Clay's solution - to create the new free state of Maine out of part of Massachusetts at the same time so as to keep the balance in the Senate, and agree upon a line of latitude to determine the status of future territories from the Louisiana Purchase joining the union - merely postponed a conflict of greater magnitude until a later date. Clay could also be regarded as guilty of delaying an inevitable face-to-face with his 'Compromise of 1850' which dealt with the land gained from Mexico in 1848. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was once again intended as a compromise, with popular sovereignty being championed by Stephen Douglas as a way of avoiding Congress or the Supreme Court having to rule on the legality of slavery; but this time the Compromise did not succeed in delaying conflict, though admittedly strife was contained to 'Bleeding Kansas', where a mini-civil war erupted between pro-slavers and free-soilers.

Slavery: an Economic and Moral issue

In recent times historians have tried to play down economic differences between North and South, but it does seem true that the South was more reluctant to embrace new technology and business methods than parts of the North, and that the vast majority (about 80 per cent) of Southern workers were employed in agriculture on the eve of war compared with only about 40 per cent in the North. The idea that the North was considerably more urbanised that the South, however, is something of a myth since three-quarters of Northerners lived outside urban areas in 1860. The key difference, of course, lay in the fact that slaves formed the backbone of the labour force in the South. Many Northerners regarded this as unfair competition regardless of the moral issue .

The Marxist/Progressive interpretation, identified particularly with Charles and Mary Beard writing in the 1920s, suggests that the war can be seen in terms of a capitalist North fighting against a feudal South, but most support for the Republican Party seems to have come from small farmers rather than big businessmen, and the party was divided on issues like the tariff, a national bank, and nativism, and embraced a range of views on the position of blacks in society. However, Eric Foner has argued that 'free labour' lay at the heart of Republican ideology, and this does suggest some sort of economic motive. William Seward, who was to become Lincoln's Secretary of State, said in 1858 that the social systems of slave labour and free labour were incompatible. Yet it can be argued that war followed secession because the North, despite appearing to have a more balanced and dynamic economy, could not afford to lose the South. The South provided 60 per cent of US exports, and possibly 15-20 per cent of the price of raw cotton went into the pockets of creditors, insurers, owners of warehouses and shipowners, most of whom were Northerners or British. An independent Confederacy could have boycotted Northern products, reduced Northern dominance of Southern trade and prevented free access down the Mississippi - factors which, in the short term, may have had a severe impact on the Northern economy.

There is evidence to suggest that until the 1850s the majority of Northerners were not sympathetic to those who favoured the abolition of slavery on moral grounds. In the 1830s William Lloyd Garrison revived the anti-slavery movement with his newspaper The Liberator and the setting up of the American Antislavery Society, but he faced much Northern opposition. Nevertheless the autobiographical book of former slave Frederick Douglass published in 1845 and Harriet Beecher Stowe's book Uncle Tom's Cabin published in 1852 undoubtedly raised the consciousness of many to the repugnant nature of slavery, and Lincoln is even reputed to have said to Stowe on meeting her in 1862, 'So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.' The tightening up of the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the 1850 Compromise also led to the appearance on Northern streets of armed slave-catchers who often worked with federal government support, thus further alienating Northern opinion. In 1854, for example, President Pierce spent over $100,000 and brought in troops to ensure that escaped slave Anthony Burns was returned to Virginia. Textile magnate Amos Lawrence may have been exaggerating somewhat when he commented: 'We went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists', but there was maybe some truth in what he said.

States' rights

Along with the issue of slavery, states' rights is often cited as a main cause of secession. Jefferson Davis, the man who became President of the Confederacy, claimed after the war that the South had fought for states' rights rather than to save slavery. It may be tempting to argue that the state right of paramount importance to Southerners was the right to own slaves. Yet when South Carolina threatened to secede over states' rights back in 1832, inspired by John Calhoun's rhetoric, it was over the tariff issue and not slavery, and as early as 1799, when none other than Thomas Jefferson had championed states' rights in the face of the draconian Alien and Sedition Acts, personal liberty was the issue at stake. Admittedly South Carolina was not supported by other states in 1832, but the above examples tend to undermine Hugh Brogan's argument that the states' rights doctrine had evolved out of a need to protect slavery. Brogan also seems to overlook the fact that states' rights had been a major concern from the writing of the Constitution itself and that the 10th Amendment had been added to calm the fears of both Northerners and Southerners who feared overmighty central government.

The South's apparent concern for states' rights ought, however, to have meant it responded with outrage when the Supreme Court in 1857 ruled in the Dred Scott case that a slave could not become free simply by living in a free territory, for the decision seemed to imply that if individual states barred slavery it had no legal basis. Yet Supreme Justice Taney's decision was met with widespread rejoicing in the South, where it was inferred that neither states nor Congress could legally bar slavery from anywhere. This rather betrayed Southern priorities.

The Southern states saw that they would become a permanent minority grouping of states if they remained in the Union and feared that it was only a matter of time before they would be outvoted by a Northern/Republican-dominated Congress on a regular basis. They were right. Years earlier the number of Northerners had outstripped Southern whites and the North had gained a majority in the House of Representatives. While the two main political parties retained genuinely nationwide support it did not matter. With the creation of the Republican party in the 1850s and its sectional support in the North, and given that the majority of settlers moving to the new territories came from the North, there was very little prospect that new slave states would be added to the Union in the years to come. The writing was on the wall for the South. Lincoln promised in 1861 that he would not interfere with slavery where it already existed, but in January 1863 he broke his word, and during the course of the war the Northerners remaining in a 'rump-Congress' took the opportunity to pass a range of laws which absent Southerners would certainly have opposed, thereby confirming the fears that Northerners would come to use Congress for their own sectional interests.

Sectional Conspiracy Theories

It is now generally accepted that the North and South had much more in common than divided them, but this does not necessarily mean that people living at the time did not believe in crude sectional stereotypes. The evidence suggests that, as time went by, rival conspiracy theories gained greater credibility. From the late 1830s in the North, the idea of a Southern 'Slave Power' bent on the expansion of slavery into new territories, curtailing freedoms and gaining control of the federal government, took hold. As Northern abolitionists stepped up their attacks on slavery so Southerners sought to justify their 'peculiar institution' more assertively, and in turn seemed to provide more evidence for conspiracy theorists. Some even claimed that the Southern slaveocracy had been responsible for the deaths by poison of two Presidents and had tried to kill three others. The 'Gag Rule' by which Congress had agreed not to discuss slavery during the period 1836-44, the fact that two-thirds of American soldiers who fought in the war against Mexico were from the Southern states, that various Southern-led expeditions tried to seize Cuba and Nicaragua in the 1850s, together with President Buchanan's apparent sympathies with pro-slavers in Kansas and the Dred Scott decision, seemed to many to confirm that a conspiracy existed. In fact no 'slave power' conspiracy did exist, but Eric Foner has argued that it became the 'ideological glue' of the Republican Party.

Southerners had their own version of a conspiracy theory and came to believe in the existence of a 'Black Republican' plot aimed at destroying slavery. Within months of the first edition of the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator coming off the presses in 1831, 60 whites had been killed in Virginia by black slaves in the Nat Turner revolt. Further abolitionist agitation and such publications as Uncle Tom's Cabin added weight to conspiracy theory. The final straw for many Southerners came with John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in 1859. Brown and his extended family, who had carried out the notorious Pottawatomie Massacre of pro-slavers in Kansas, stepped up their campaign by trying to seize weapons so that slaves could be armed to rebel. Despite outright condemnation of the raid from men such as Lincoln, rumours abounded in the South that Brown had had the support of Northern businessmen and politicians, and - whether they were true or not - people believed them. The execution of Brown shocked Northern opinion, which further convinced Southerners that there was no future for them in the Union.

If Northerners believed that Southerners who said they would secede were bluffing, they were tragically wrong; and if Southerners believed that Northerners would not fight to bring them back into the Union, they too were fatally mistaken.

The Role of Individuals

Historians James Randall and Avery Craven claimed in the 1940s that politicians, leaders and other individuals on both sides were unusually incompetent in the period leading up to the war, and Michael Holt in 1978 argued that the real cause of the crisis that led to war was the disintegration of the Whig-Democrat party system and the complete loss of faith in politicians at national level. It can be argued, however, that the Whig-Democrat system had survived by avoiding the issue of slavery or by reaching compromises that could only last in the short term. As far back as 1820, with the Missouri Compromise, Congress had voted sectionally rather than along party lines. Perhaps by 1860 politicians had become more ideological and were not prepared to bury the issue of slavery and pretend that all was well with the Union. Nevertheless it can certainly be contended that men like John Calhoun, William Seward and Jefferson Davis were sectional politicians who lacked national followings and who stood to gain from conflict. Presidents Pierce and Buchanan have been severely criticised for their roles in allowing the conflict to escalate in the 1850s. John Brown was described as 'the meteor of war' by Herman Melville and his raid has been seen by many historians as the single most important factor in the build-up to war. Ed Bearss has pointed out that the most crucial consequence of Brown's raid was the reorganisation of the militia in the South which marked a preliminary stage to the formal raising of a Confederate army. The Democrat Stephen Douglas certainly was not a sectional politician, but it was his desire for personal profit, both financial and political, by championing the building of a transcontinental railroad through his home state of Illinois, that led him to advocate the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He thought that through popular sovereignty, that is by allowing settlers in Kansas territory to vote on whether they wanted slavery or not, Congress and the Supreme Court could avoid the thorny question of the legality of slavery; but he had misjudged the mood in the North and the growing moral distaste for slavery. His campaign helped to lead to the demise of the Whig Party and the subsequent rise of the Republican party - and, finally, to Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was another non-sectional politician, the man who could have allowed the seceding Southern states to go their own way but whose iron resolve to save the Union, and refusal to yield when last-ditch attempts at compromise were made in the Crittenden Plan, ensured that war would happen.

Conclusion

Contemporary Northern writer Nathaniel Hawthorne once said, 'We have gone to war, and we seem to have little, or at least, a very misty idea of what we are fighting for ... The Southern man will say, we fight for states' rights, liberty and independence. The middle and Western states man will avow that he fights for the Union; whilst our Northern and Eastern man will swear that, from the beginning, his only idea was liberty to the Blacks, and the annihilation of slavery.'

The causes of secession are not necessarily the same as the causes of the war itself, but the slavery issue refused to go away. Whether rival historians have cited economic reasons, states' rights, conspiracy theories, or sectional politicians, they have unwittingly confirmed the significance of slavery or the expansion of slavery as the main cause of the war. The main economic difference between North and South was slave labour, the key state right for most Southerners was the legality of slavery, and where conspiracists and agitators stirred up emotions they did so over the issue of slavery. Had slavery not existed in the states, is it then possible to imagine that a war would have happened?

Issues to Debate

How convincing is the argument that slavery was the single most important factor in producing the Civil War?

How important was the issue of states' right in causing the conflict?

What role did Abraham Lincoln play?

Further Reading:

Ken Burns, The Civil War (video 1989)

Alan Brinkley, The Unfinished Nation (McGraw Hill, 2000)

Hugh Brogan, The Penguin History of the USA (Penguin, 1999)

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Michael Holt, The Political Crisis of the 1850s (Norton,1978)

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James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom (Penguin, 1990)

Kenneth Stampp (ed), The Causes of the Civil War (Simon and Schuster, 1991)

Hugh Tulloch, The Debate on the American Civil War Era (MUP, 1999)

John Spicer is course leader for history and politics at Ashton-under-Lyne Sixth Form College. He is joint author of Spotlight on US History 1763-2000 (Routledge, 2004).