

Lecture Notes

Causes of the Civil War
United States History



SLAVERY - The Elephant in the Room

A lot of people argue about whether slavery was *the* cause of the Civil War. The whole “the Civil War was/wasn’t about Slavery” thing is an oversimplification and people who participate in this debate (on both sides of this question) are missing the point. This is a war that killed 600,000 Americans. To reduce it to one cause or to try to minimize the impact of an obvious crucial factor is counter-historical.

Think about it this way: When was the last time someone asked you to identify the *cause* of World War I? Someone would think you were an idiot if you were to say that there was only one cause of World War I. Slavery was one of a number of factors - and indeed the most prominent - but other notable causes included:

1. Growing economic and social differences between the North and the South

- Jefferson (Agriculture) vs. Hamilton (Industry)
- Manufacturing and Industry in the North
 - Urbanization
 - Gradual Emancipation following the American Revolution in the North
- Agriculture in the South
 - Cotton Gin / “King Cotton”
 - Increased Dependence on Slavery
 - Rural, Agricultural, one crop economy

2. Debates Concerning the Role of the Federal Government, the Rights of the States, and the Nature of the Union

- Jefferson (Articles on Crack) vs. Hamilton (National Government)
 - Strict vs. Loose Construction
- Henry Clay’s American System (National Bank, Internal Improvements, Protective Tariff)
 - Was the American System Constitutional?
 - National Bank
 - Supported by Hamilton, Opposed by Jefferson and Jackson
 - Internal Improvements
 - Very limited in antebellum period
 - Protective Tariff
 - Nullification Crisis (Tariff of 1828)
 - Calhoun, “The Union... next to our liberties, most dear.”

3. Growth of Antislavery Movements

- Abolitionism
 - William Lloyd Garrison
 - *The Liberator* (Published 1833)
- Abolitionists weren't very influential in the North OR the South until the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s.
- The Free Soil movement was by far the more influential antislavery movement in the 1840s and 1850s.

4. Corresponding Southern Defense of Slavery

- "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." -- Newton's Third Law
- When you accuse a Southerner of being wrong, they become more right.
- Jefferson ("Wolf by the Ear" - 1820) vs. Calhoun ("Positive Good" - 1837)

5. Westward Expansion of the United States

- Manifest Destiny
- Texas Annexation
 - Delayed for nearly a decade to avoid controversy
- **Free Soil**
 - For "free soilers," it wasn't about whether slavery should exist, but whether slavery should exist in *Western territories*.
- Wilmot Proviso
- Popular Sovereignty / S. Douglas / "Bleeding Kansas"

6. Failure of Political Compromise / Change in Generational Values (R.I.P. Webster, Clay, Calhoun)

- Antebellum Political Compromises (Clay - 1820, 1833, 1850)
- Daniel Webster vs. Charles Sumner (Same Seat, Different Day)
- Parity between free and slave states replaced by Free Soil
- 1830s (Gag Rule) vs. 1850s (Open Discussion of Slavery in Congress)
- Crittenden Compromise (1860) - FAILED

7. Rise of the Free Soil Movement and the Republican Party

- 1852 - Collapse of the "Second Two Party System" (*Democrats vs. Whigs*)
- Sectional Party
- "Free Soil"
- Goal: Elect a President & Congressional Majority exclusively from free states

8. Decline of Southern Political Power

- 8 of the first 12 presidents were from the South
- 1912 - Next time a Southerner elected POTUS (Wilson)
- 1964 - Next time a Southerner elected POTUS who actually *lived* in the South

- FACTOID: 4 of the last 9 Presidents have been from the South

9. Escalating Violence, Paranoia, and Distrust

- Bleeding Kansas / John Brown
- Brooks/Sumner Incident
- To the North, every Southerner is Preston Brooks
- To the South, every Northerner is John Brown
- “Slave Power” Conspiracy
 - Dred Scott
 - The South wants to spread slavery everywhere
 - Lincoln’s “House Divided” Speech”

10. Election of Lincoln (*Catalyst or Immediate Cause*)

- Lincoln was elected president in 1860 without the support of a single slave state
 - A “free soiler,” but does it matter? (Perception is Reality)
 - The “Deep South” secedes
- Lincoln calls for 75,000 troops after Fort Sumter
 - The “Upper South” secedes
- Whose fault was it?
 - That discussion could go on forever!

Hopefully, I have been able to make it clear that the causes of the Civil War were manifold and complex, as any serious discussion about the Civil War has to recognize the complexity of its causes.