

Conflict and Compromise

The Political Economy of
Slavery, Emancipation, and
the American Civil War

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Historical Puzzles

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who gave their lives, that that nation might live. . . .

We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln, November 18, 1863¹

It was written, rumor has it, on the back of an envelope during the train ride from Washington on the day of the speech, and it took Abraham Lincoln less than two minutes to read the full text of his address to the people gathered at the cemetery just outside Gettysburg on that fall day in 1863. Intending only to say a few words to commemorate the efforts of those who died at Gettysburg and to encourage those who were carrying on the fight, Lincoln provided history with an eloquent and succinct statement of what the conflict between Union and Confederacy was all about.

Lincoln's reference to the founding fathers reminds us that it is in the creation of the Union itself that we will find the genesis of the conflict that eventually erupted into a war between the states. The breaking of that pact, after all, precipitated the violent struggle in which Americans found themselves in 1863. Well before that day at Gettysburg, Lincoln and many other Americans realized that the union created in 1789 could *not* endure indefinitely. The United States of America might, as Lincoln observed, have been "conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." But the fact remained that the government established by the Constitution of the United States sanc-

1 Cited in Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (Charles Scribners and Sons, 1971), 7: 449.

tioned – and indeed encouraged – the continuation of one of the most pernicious systems of human bondage ever devised. The mere presence of Negro slavery in an ostensibly “free” society represented a contradiction; and the American system of slavery represented much more than a “presence.” The system of chattel labor was the cornerstone of the economic and social structure for one-third of the United States.

Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address also reminds us what it took to remove this contradiction: the bloodiest war in American history. Only a few months earlier, over 50,000 men had been killed or wounded near the spot where Lincoln spoke. Yet the carnage at Gettysburg was only a small fraction of the full toll of that war. By the time that Robert E. Lee’s troops finally laid down their arms at Appomattox, at least 625,000 men had lost their lives fighting either to preserve the American Union or to create a new one, and almost as many endured injuries and wounds. Gettysburg was the climactic battle of that war; it has always been identified as the single event that marked when the tide unmistakably turned in favor of the Union. “The World,” Lincoln claimed, “will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what [those who died] did here.” He was only partly right. Contrary to his expectation, people remembered what Lincoln said there. His call for “a new birth of freedom” was a recognition that the time had come for the contradiction embodied in the Constitution to be finally removed. The war to preserve the Union had become a struggle to eradicate slavery in the United States.

The Changing Past: Writing and Rewriting Civil War History

The American Civil War was one of those events that inalterably changed the course of history. One out of every four soldiers who fought in the Civil War lost his life, a toll larger than the *total* number of military deaths in all other American wars from the American Revolution through the Korean War. Because it was a “civil” war, it left scars that would not heal for generations – and in places that have not yet completely healed. The efforts at “reconstruction” and eventual reunion of the rebellious southern states permanently changed the relations between black and white Americans. That this radical revolution eventually fell far short of its goals should not obscure the fact that there was one positive legacy from the Civil War: the emancipation of four million black slaves.

The history of all this has been written and rewritten many times. Although the historical events do not change, the interpretations that historians put on those events do. In the case of the Civil War, the events

were so overwhelming that the scope for historical interpretation (and reinterpretation) is almost boundless. Successive generations of generals, politicians, historians, and novelists have examined in painstaking detail the causes, course, and consequences of the great conflict. The result is a vast literature that fills entire sections of every public library in the United States.

From the time when the first memoirs of generals began to appear immediately after the war, participants and historians have retraced the campaigns of the war and scrutinized the lives of the men who fought in them.² This fascination with “battles and leaders” continues to the present; military books on the Civil War still find a ready market in the United States today.³ As time passed and Americans began to reflect on the events and impact of the war, various “omnibus” histories of the Civil War appeared, from highly detailed examinations of the war and its causes to much shorter volumes that sketch out a broad theme but leave out some of the details.⁴ Finally, a vast collection of books, articles, and

- 2 The editors of *Century Magazine* paved the way for this genre of work when they published a four-volume collection of essays, “being for the most part, contributions by Union and Confederate officers.” Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Grant-Lee edition, 4 vols. (The Century Company, 1884).
- 3 Recent works dealing with leaders include the following biographies: William McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (W. W. Norton, 1981); Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (Ticknor and Fields, 1988); James I. Robertson, *General A. P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior* (Random House, 1987); and Emory M. Thomas, *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J. E. B. Stuart* (Harper and Row, 1986). Accounts of specific battles include Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (Ticknor and Fields, 1983); James McDonough, *Chattanooga: A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (University of Tennessee Press, 1984); Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (University of Tennessee Press, 1987). Broader analyses of the military operations of the war also abound; recent efforts worthy of note include Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (University of Illinois Press, 1983); Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University of Alabama Press, 1982); and the essays in Richard Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., *Why the South Lost the War* (University of Georgia Press, 1986).
- 4 The overriding work in this area is, of course, Allan Nevins’s eight-volume series on *The Ordeal of the Union*. More recent examples of such omnibus works on a less ambitious scale include David H. Donald, *Liberty and Union* (D. C. Heath, 1978); Peter Batty and Peter Parrish, *The Divided Union: The Story of the Great American War, 1861–1865* (Salem House Publishers, 1987); and James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford University Press, 1988). There are also many works that, although quite general in their approach, have narrowed their focus to a particular period or broad region. Examples would include David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848–1861* (Harper Torchbooks, 1976), and Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Vintage Press, 1965). Evidence of current interest in a general approach to the coming of the war and Reconstruction can be seen in the work of William J. Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); Michael Perman, *Emancipation and Reconstruction, 1862–1879* (Harlan Davidson,

monographs have dealt with specific periods, places, or people during the Civil War era. By examining in depth some particular aspect of the times, these works provide the research findings that form the basis for the broader interpretations and reinterpretations of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

What can we add to this? One obvious possibility is to bridge the gap that exists between the general or omnibus work and the more specialized research addressed primarily to historians. We live in an age of specialization, and the academic world is no exception. The great reward to specialization is that it fosters a concentration on a specific task (or in the case of historical research, a specific topic) that permits an attention to detail that could never be attained by someone trying to do everything at once. But there is a corresponding cost. Specialization narrows the focus of historical research by imposing restrictions on the scope of study. These restrictions have several dimensions. Most obvious are those of "time and place." Historians have divided their profession into a multitude of little "boxes" delimited by the time period and the group or region to be studied. Within each of these boxes the individual historian then places his or her particular methodological imprint on the problem being studied.⁵ The results of this specialization are illuminating, and they provide valuable insights toward an understanding of the larger framework of historical events. But determining how all these pieces fit together into a carefully crafted jigsaw puzzle requires that we step back from time to time to see if there are not some common themes to many of the specialized works.

The job of fitting various pieces into a larger picture, however, is complicated by the fact that historians are continually "revising" history. By its nature, revisionist history presents an interpretation at odds with the prevailing view, which means that a particular piece of research was not meant to fit easily into the existing historical paradigm. Still, revisionist arguments are seldom so drastically different that they represent a

1987); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (Harper and Row, 1988); and Richard H. Sewell, *A House Divided: Sectionalism and Civil War, 1848-1865* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

5 Two examples will illustrate the point. In *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge University Press, 1977) by Richard Sutch and myself, we focused our analysis on the period 1859 to 1900, and we concentrated on a region that we defined as the "cotton South." Finally, we presented an analysis that stressed the "economic" consequences of emancipation. Political historians have, on occasion, carried the logic of specialization even further. In his study of the origins of the Republican party, William E. Gienapp focused on a single political party in the North, and his study covers a period of only five years; see *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

total break with other interpretations. Our inability to put such pieces in place is often a result of being asked to view the piece from an unfamiliar angle. This problem can be particularly acute when methods that have not been widely employed in historical research are introduced. Specialists are preoccupied with the novelty of their methodology, whereas generalists are not familiar enough with the new techniques to see how the findings can be integrated into the larger historical framework.

Over the past three decades, the development and application of quantitative techniques – aided by the appearance of a computer technology that enables us to analyze huge bodies of data – have had a major impact on the study of American history. This use of quantitative methods has been particularly pronounced in the study of social, economic, and political developments, and the results of this research have considerably changed the way we look at the Civil War. Economic historians have pictured the antebellum South as a region full of economic vitality and growth, in contrast to the conventional view of a backward society struggling with the burdens of slavery. Extending these findings into the post-war era revealed just how profound the impact of emancipation was on southern society. Political historians found that the politics of both the antebellum period and Reconstruction were more diverse and complex than the earlier view of controversy over slavery and black equality after the war had suggested. The findings of these researchers have been largely accepted, yet the full implications of their results have not yet appeared as part of the historical explanations of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era.

This book is an attempt to step back and take a broader look at a particular part of the historical puzzle of the Civil War and Reconstruction era: the problem of slavery and emancipation in the United States. I have chosen to cover the period from 1776 to 1876 – which is slightly longer than that taken by most treatments of the Civil War – because the frustrations and anger that ultimately prompted the Civil War were the product of a long period of tension created by a problem that would not go away. Nor did the problem disappear with the outbreak of war. Emancipation was not a foregone conclusion in 1860, and when it finally came, the people in neither the North nor the South fully understood the forces that were unleashed – hence my decision to extend my analysis through the war and up to 1876. Nor do I propose to eschew the gains of academic specialization. As the term “political economy” in the subtitle suggests, my analysis will focus primarily on those economic and political factors that pertain to the way in which slavery led to the conflict in 1860. Because my arguments draw heavily on the methodology and

empirical work that has been done by economic and political historians, it will be useful to review the findings of this body of quantitative research.

The Numbers Game: Economics and Politics in the Civil War Era

In 1863 the British political economist J. E. Cairnes offered the following analysis of the rupture between the American states:

So long as [the slave power] itself was the dominant party, so long as it could employ the powers of government in propagating its peculiar institution and consolidating its strength, so long was it content to remain in the Union; but the moment when, by the constitutional triumph of the Republicans, the government passed into the hands of a party whose distinctive principle was to impose a limit on slavery, from that moment its continuance in the Union was incompatible with its essential objects, and from that moment the Slave Power resolved to break loose from Federal Ties.⁶

Cairnes's view that the Civil War was brought on by southern outrage over the triumph of the Republican president placed blame for the conflict squarely on the shoulders of a southern slavocracy determined to preserve its system of black slavery at all costs. The election of Abraham Lincoln – a man whose announced policy was the containment of the slave system – was unacceptable to slaveholders, who interpreted the Republican triumph as proof that their northern brethren were no longer willing to tolerate the presence of slavery in the United States. To threaten slavery, of course, was to threaten the very foundation of economic and social organization in the American South. Southerners – those who did not own slaves as well as those who did – took up arms to defend a way of life that depended on the continued enslavement of blacks. It was, to their way of thinking, a way of life that was incompatible with the lifestyle in other areas of the United States. Gaining independence for the South was the only way to preserve the slave system.

It is a plausible story, and like most plausible stories there is at least a grain of truth in it. A substantial majority of Southerners probably did favor dissolution of the Union if that was what it took to preserve their peculiar institution, and many Southerners doubtless felt that their system was threatened by the growing ascendancy of the northern Re-

6 J. E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power: It's [sic] Character, Career, and Probable Designs: Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues Involved in the American Contest* (1862; reprint, Harper and Row, 1969), p. 20.

publicans. But as an explanation of why the two regions went to war in 1860 Cairnes's story is, at best, naive and rather incomplete.

Several important questions are left unanswered. Most obvious is why the North chose to fight a war in 1861 instead of seeking – as it had on several occasions in the past – a compromise with the slave power. If the South's intransigence made compromise impossible, why not simply let the Southerners secede? The traditional answer was that Northerners wanted to be rid of slavery, yet preserve the Union. However, studies of voting patterns have revealed a far more complex interplay of forces than a simple distaste for "slave power" or a love of the Union suggests. Slavery was only one of the factors attracting the attention of voters in the free states of the North – and for most voters it may not have been the most important. By the middle of the 1840s, the arrival of large numbers of immigrants had created deep divisions in northern society. The new arrivals faced various obstacles to assimilation into the social system, and they found that rallying solidly around one or the other of the political parties offered an opportunity to mitigate these problems. The immigrants' political solidarity was matched by a strong resentment against these newcomers on the part of "native" Americans. The pressures of adjusting to economic and social change in a society that was becoming increasingly urban and industrial created additional sources of frustration for the average worker in the North. These concerns over economic conditions and ethnic rivalries overshadowed questions of slavery in shaping the political alliances of the antebellum North.⁷

Viewed in this light, the question that cries out for an answer is how were the Republicans able to forge a strong enough consensus among these disparate groups of voters to capture both the White House and the Congress by the elections of 1860? Political historians claim that the answer to this question ultimately rests on an analysis of why the political system, which had contained the problem of slavery for a long time, was suddenly unable to handle the pressures that arose in the late 1850s. The collapse of national parties was not, they argue, the result of some unifying force from the opposition to slavery gaining ascendancy in the North. On the contrary, politics in the North were becoming increasingly factionalized, as each state presented a different political agenda for the national parties to wrestle with. It was this diversity that produced political pressures that the national leadership was unable (or perhaps unwill-

7 Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's* (W. W. Norton, 1878), and Joel Silbey, ed., *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1985), are examples of works dealing with the emergence of ethnic politics in the North.

ing) to channel effectively toward a peaceful resolution of the problem of slavery when it reappeared on the scene in the 1850s.⁸

And what about the South? Cairnes suggested that Southerners were governed by a monolithic “slave power” that hastily pushed them into secession and an unwise war. Yet, as critics of this position have pointed out, the South did not rush to war. Only six states joined South Carolina within the first four months of that state’s secession; the rest waited to see what would develop when Lincoln took office. Moreover, the votes on secession were close enough in several states to suggest that there was substantial Unionist sentiment – particularly in the hill country and the “upper South.” A closer look at the evidence on southern political parties confirms the suspicion that there was not a monolithic political position in the South. In fact, there were deep tensions in the slave society that frequently spilled over into the political debates of the time. As was the case in the North, these tensions were not identical in every state. Political histories of the antebellum South reveal very noticeable regional differences that were to surface with increased importance in the newly formed Confederacy.⁹

So where do we look for blame for the war? Michael Holt provides one answer when he asserts that:

Popular grievances, no matter how intense, do not dictate party strategies. Political leaders do. . . . Much of the story of the coming of the Civil War is the story of the successful efforts of Democratic politicians in the South and Republican politicians in the North to keep the sectional conflict at the center of political debate and to defeat political rivals who hoped to exploit other issues to achieve election.¹⁰

According to this view, politicians in the late antebellum period were exploiting the issues for their own purposes rather than seeking to lessen

8 The emphasis on the problems confronting those seeking to form a Republican party can be seen in Michael Holt’s study of party politics in Pittsburgh, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (Yale University Press, 1969); Roland P. Formisano’s study of Michigan politics, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton University Press, 1971); and William E. Gienapp’s study of the formative years of the Republican party, *The Origins of the Republican Party*.

9 See, for example, J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1860* (Oxford University Press, 1983); and Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836–1865* (Louisiana State University Press, 1983). All of these studies stress that there were deep social and economic divisions between various groups in the South.

10 Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850’s*, p. 184.

the level of conflict posed by the tensions of slavery: Political mismanagement, not some inexorable conflict over slavery, produced the political collapse leading to war.

Although it provides important insights into the differing political reactions of specific states or regions in the North, this contention that slavery was a problem that should have been contained by adroit political leadership contains an implicit assumption that somehow the tensions associated with it could have somehow been defused, or that perhaps slavery would simply have “gone away.” Politicians, in this scheme of things, allowed the *symptoms* of the disease to get out of hand. But the symptoms were very real and represented a major political irritant so long as the disease of slavery was still there. Was the disease about to “go away”? Few people thought so in 1860. Most worried that the disease of slavery was spreading, not in some form of recession. By the middle of the century it was becoming clear that the only “cure” for the problem was to remove the contradiction of slavery. There were two options: The Union could be split into separate slave and free political entities, or slavery could be eliminated within the Union. Neither provided the basis for a political agenda leading to a national consensus.

The problem, of course, was that slavery was an institution that had insinuated itself into every facet of American life. Everyone concedes that slave labor was the cornerstone that supported the plantation economy of the antebellum period. Prior to the 1960s, most historians argued that the foundation rested on sand, not bedrock. Writing in 1918, a leading historian of American slavery claimed that:

Because they were blinded by the abolition agitation in the North . . . , most of the later generation of ante-bellum planters could not see that slaveholding was essentially burdensome. But that which was partly hidden from their vision is clear to us today. In the great system of southern industry and commerce, working with seeming smoothness, the negro laborers were inefficient in spite of discipline, and slavery was an obstacle to all progress.¹¹

What U. B. Phillips thought was “clear to us” in 1918 about the profitability of slavery remained accepted wisdom among historians for an-

11 Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Little, Brown, 1929), p. 275. Phillips's characterization was widely accepted by critics of slavery at the time. See, for example, Frederick Law Olmsted, whose extensive travels through the South provide one of the most telling critiques of slave labor (*The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. and introd. Arthur Schlesinger [Alfred A. Knopf, 1953], originally published in 1861); Hinton R. Helper, whose view of an “impending crisis” was predicated on the economic deficiencies of slavery (*The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* [A. B. Burdick, 1860]); and J. E. Cairnes, who decried the political as well as the economic power in the hands of southern slaveholders (*The Slave Power*).

other forty years. Indeed, the proposition that slavery was “unprofitable” was regarded as little short of historical “truth.” There were, to be sure, a few who dissented.¹² But it was not until 1956, when Kenneth Stampp published his book, *The Peculiar Institution*, that the conventional wisdom about the economic viability of slavery was seriously challenged.¹³ Stampp argued that slavery was not only “profitable” but was the economic mainspring propelling economic life in the antebellum South.

Stampp’s book proved to be only the opening salvo of an attack that would ultimately turn the accepted wisdom about the economic profitability of slavery on its head. Two years later a pair of young economic historians, Alfred Conrad and John Meyer, published an article titled “The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South.”¹⁴ Conrad and Meyer presented an economic analysis that unlocked the mysteries of how a system of chattel labor could thrive in a capitalist market setting and touched off a major revision in the way in which economic historians viewed the slave system in America. So successful were these attacks on the prevailing view that in the years following the appearance of Stampp’s book and the Conrad–Meyer essay, the view of slavery upheld by Phillips has been almost totally abandoned.¹⁵ Not only has slavery been shown to be profitable to southern planters; in 1961 Douglass North argued that the cotton economy of the South was the leading force behind the economic expansion of the American economy in the period 1790–1845.¹⁶

12 Lewis Cecil Gray, in his monumental study of southern agriculture, insisted that slavery was profitable, and Robert Russell also took strong exception to Phillips’s view. See Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Carnegie Institution, 1933); Robert R. Russel, “The General Effects of Slavery upon Southern Economic Progress,” *Journal of Southern History* 4 (February 1938), and idem, “The Effects of Slavery on Nonslaveholders in the Ante-Bellum South,” *Agriculture History* 15 (April 1941). In 1942, Thomas Govan cautiously asserted that “the students who have stated that slavery was profitable are more nearly correct than those who deny its profitability”; see “Was Plantation Slavery Profitable?” *Journal of Southern History* 8 (November 1942): 131.

13 Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Alfred Knopf, 1956).

14 Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, “The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South,” *Journal of Political Economy* 66 (April 1958).

15 Of course, this change in views was not accomplished without an extensive literature being published on the subject. One of the most significant consequences of the Conrad–Meyer paper was that it brought economists into the discussion. The fruits of that discussion will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter 3.

16 Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (Prentice-Hall, 1961). See Richard Sutch for a discussion of the impact that North’s model had on the economic history of the antebellum period (“Douglass North and the New Economic History,” in *Explorations in the New Economic History: Essays in Honor of Douglass C. North*, ed. Roger L. Ransom, Richard Sutch, and Gary M. Walton (Academic Press, 1982).