

What Drove the South to Secession

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The early to mid 1800s proved to be a pivotal time for the United States, in which the fate of hundreds of thousands of men was decided. The debates on the nation's stance on slavery and the possible rebellion of the southern states of America distinguish this period from any other in American history. Because the nation was so divided in its views, the result of these debates was the secession of the South and the American Civil War. A thorough examination of the secession arguments is needed to determine how the arguments changed and intensified over time.

Although the exact date of when the sectional unrest and debates over the institution of slavery really began is unknown, it is certain that this problem had been evident at least from the ratification of the Constitution. In 1788 the United States ratified the Constitution after much deliberation on major issues such as representation and the balance of political power. One issue that was not sufficiently addressed, however, was the issue of slavery. The Founding Fathers avoided this issue as much as possible because they knew what a sensitive and potentially dangerous subject it was. Instead, "the convention preferred to heed Oliver Ellsworth's advice. 'Let us not intermeddle,' he said, dismissing the problem with the optimistic prediction that 'slavery in time will not be a speck in our country.'"¹ This proved to be the opinion of many members of the Convention. Most felt that slavery would essentially die out, so there was no point in delving too deeply into the issue. "The southern delegates, especially those from South Carolina, wanted the convention's assurances that the slave trade would

¹ Berkin, Carol. A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution. New York: Harcourt Inc., 2002, p. 113.

continue, at least for a time.”² They got their wish in the form of the famous Three-Fifths Compromise, in which each slave (at this time essentially property) counted as 3/5 of a person in questions of population for governmental representation. For the North to go along with this, however, the South agreed to the ban of the slave trade effective after the year 1808.³ “Beyond that, when most of the framers of the Constitution contemplated the problem of slavery, they seem simply to have hoped it would gradually go away.”⁴

By 1810 the slave trade had ceased to exist (legally) in the United States, and yet slavery was far from dwindling, as the Founding Fathers had hoped. If anything, the problem was becoming worse, because the government had started limiting the institution of slavery by banning the importation of slaves into the country. Many states in the North were gradually outlawing slavery within their borders, such as Illinois, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.⁵ Throughout the course of the South to its secession from the Union existed the common complaint that the North was trying to abolish slavery in the South. Although a popular belief, it was not necessarily true. As an institution, slavery was unquestionably less popular in the North, but most people at the turn of the century did not care whether or not slavery existed in the South. In all actuality, “antislavery Yankees began to capture the northern majority’s sympathy only after Southerners demanded national proslavery laws. Both the Slavepower’s demands for legislative protection and the way the minority pushed demands through majoritarian processes violated northern senses of democratic

² Berkin, Carol. A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution. New York: Harcourt Inc., 2002, p. 113.

³ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 14.

⁴ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 14-15.

⁵ “Popular Sovereignty Should Settle the Slavery Question.” Alton, Illinois, 15 Oct. 1858. Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 73-76.

government.”⁶ Things really started heating up when more and more territories began entering the Union and the question of whether each would be a free or a slave state arose. It was at this point that the slave states started to realize that they were in danger of becoming a minority.⁷ If they were to become a minority, they would not have equal representation in government, and eventually, they postulated, slavery (an institution dear to them but not to the potential majority) might be outlawed as a whole. At first, however, the fear of the abolition of slavery was uncommon in the South, and the main focus was that of equal representation. Because the South felt underrepresented, the North and South made numerous compromises, such as the Missouri Compromise in 1820. In the Missouri Compromise, Maine was admitted to the Union as a free state, and Missouri as a slave state. Although this agreement was implemented to preserve the balance of free and slave states in order to quell southern fears of representational inequality, part of the compromise also limited slavery even further. Both sides agreed that from that point on, slavery would stay below latitude 36°30’.

Even though the South agreed to the Missouri Compromise, southern demands of equality plagued the subsequent decades. Even in places where the Missouri Compromise banned slavery the South was known to forgo their part of the Compromise and attempt to introduce territories into the Union as slave states located outside of the boundaries. An example of this is the debate over Kansas. Senator Stephen A. Douglas wanted the western railroad to run from his home state of Illinois, and to do that the territory of Nebraska was to be brought into the Union as a state. Because the Nebraska

⁶ Freehling, William W. The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, p. viii.

⁷ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 16.

territory was above the appropriated divisional line, it was to enter the Union as a free state. This, argued Southerners, would upset the balance of free and slave states, so they proposed that Nebraska be split in two, and the lower territory (to be called Kansas) would be admitted into the Union as a slave state. However this would go against the Missouri Compromise, argued Northerners, because Kansas was above 36°30', thus automatically making it a free state. Douglas proposed that popular sovereignty rule, and the territory itself should decide whether it was to be a free or slave state. A tumult of bloody feuding commenced, thus earning the territory the nickname "Bleeding Kansas".⁸ The United States never saw the end to the problem of what Kansas was to become until after the Civil War, and the only thing these debates really accomplished was to cause more of a rift between the North and the South.⁹

The debate now moved from representation to the issue of slavery because of the Missouri Compromise. Once the South received equal representation in one decision, Southern politicians demanded it again and again when other states entered the Union such as Kansas, New Mexico and Wisconsin, regardless of the location of the territory. "These southern drives for minority protection flowed partly out of fear that the South could not stand solid against the northern extreme."¹⁰ When this demand was not swiftly met each time a territory entered the Union (mainly because their demands ignored the agreement in the Missouri Compromise) many in the South began questioning the North's motives for denying the South its right to an equal voice. Many came to the

⁸ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 20.

⁹ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 16-20.

¹⁰ Freehling, William W. The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, p. viii.

conclusion that the issue was not just about representation but also about the continuation of slavery in the United States. By denying the South an equal voice, the North would have an easier time abolishing slavery. The Dred Scott decision intensified their apprehension, because in the decision, the Supreme Court ruled that slavery could technically exist in any territory because Congress could not limit it. Nevertheless, the battle for gaining slave states was still met with opposition from the North, which drove the South into a frenzy.¹¹

Each time the South's demands were denied the anti-North sentiments gained momentum. Many in the South began accusing the North of trying to conquer the South, and this opinion started to manifest itself in the newspapers of the time period. The longer the South was unhappy with what they felt was unequal treatment, the worse the propaganda and anti-North sentiments became. "The propaganda of northern and southern agitators is often considered one of the prime causes of the American Civil War."¹² During the 1850s and 1860s the escalation of the slavery problem can be attributed mainly to the slander produced by the newspapers that significantly swayed people's opinions. In many pro-slavery articles Northerners and abolitionists (both terms often used interchangeably) were attacked, accused of "justify[ing] and applaud[ing] interference of slavery in the States, in whatever form such interference may be undertaken."¹³ Another pro-slavery article published in Richmond, Virginia on July 21, 1854 is full of negative publicity aimed at abolitionists. In this time period (thanks to

¹¹ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 20-21.

¹² Stamp, Kenneth M. And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis 1860-1861. Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1950, p. 1.

¹³ "Feeling in the South" St. Louis Bulletin 13 Dec. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 9.

many of the newspapers) it was common to assume that if someone was an abolitionist he or she was automatically a terrible person from the North. Although this is not entirely the case, the slander from the pro-slavery Southerners argued that it was so. An article titled “The North and the South in the Revolutionary Struggle” notes that “the people at the North have become bitterly prejudiced against the South and everything Southern.”¹⁴ The editorial goes on to attack abolitionists, saying: “it is of no moment, that the moral code of the Abolitionists inculcates, as cardinal virtues, perjury and theft... and that their patriotism rests for its support upon resistance to the laws, and treason to the Constitution.”¹⁵ This entire article is full of negative comments and insinuations that the abolitionists (who did usually disagree with national laws permitting slavery) were out to destroy the South. Famous abolitionist Charles Sumner is portrayed as a bloodthirsty politician who delighted in his numerous attempts to belittle and devastate the South, and this article, like so many others, uses politicians who opposed slavery as an example of what all people in the North must have been feeling against the South at this time.¹⁶ An article from The Republican noted that at least the abolitionists admitted their “treasonable schemes” and that the rest of the North should confess that they plot against slavery (and subsequently the South) just as the abolitionists do. Abolitionists, argue the article, are essentially the lesser of two evils because at least they were honest about

¹⁴ “The North and the South in the Revolutionary Struggle.” Richmond Examiner 21 July 1854. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

¹⁵ “The North and the South in the Revolutionary Struggle.” Richmond Examiner 21 July 1854. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

¹⁶ “The North and the South in the Revolutionary Struggle.” Richmond Examiner 21 July 1854. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

hating the South and working toward abolishing slavery while the rest of the Northerners pretended to be innocent.¹⁷

Similarly, the article ““Does the Republican Party Propose to Interfere with Slavery in the States?”” (published in 1859) is comprised of a list of quotes by Republican politicians. In the introduction to the article is the declaration that the answer to the title question would be left up to the reader, and that the writer’s only purpose in the article was to provide the reader with quotes from the Republican politicians so that they could discern their answer from their words themselves. Some of the quotes emulate just how effective propaganda was for the South. In the article Rufus P. Spauld is quoted to say: “In the alternative being presented of the CONTINUANCE OF SLAVERY or a dissolution of the Union, WE ARE FOR A DISSOLUTION, and we care not how quick it comes.”¹⁸ The New York Times is quoted with: “The time is fast approaching when the cry will become too overpowering to resist. RATHER THAN TOLERATE NATIONAL SLAVERY AS IT NOW EXISTS, LET THE UNION BE DISSOLVED AT ONCE, AND THEN THE SIN OF SLAVERY WILL REST WHERE IT BELONGS.”¹⁹ Throughout this article the important words that the editor wants attention drawn to (so the reader can decide for himself whether or not the Republicans are against slavery) are in capital letters. The use of capital letters not only effectively draws attention to phrases like: “IT IS THE NORTH ARRAYED AGAINST THE SOUTH” and “MEN MUST FOMENT INSURRECTION AMONG THE SLAVES”, but

¹⁷ Untitled Excerpt from The Republican 24 July 1856. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 1.

¹⁸ ““Does the Republican Party Propose to Interfere with Slavery in the States?”” St. Louis Republican 17 Sept. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 9.

¹⁹ ““Does the Republican Party Propose to Interfere with Slavery in the States?”” St. Louis Republican 17 Sept. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 9.

it also gives the article an unbalanced and frantic sense.²⁰ By capitalizing phrases about war and dissolution it gives the reader a sense of urgency. This effect may have helped shape public opinion and convince people that nothing could have been done to save the Union at this point and that secession was the only answer to southern problems, and must be implemented quickly.²¹

Like “The North and the South in the Revolutionary Struggle,” “The Hour of Peril to the Union” also attacks the free states. Written just after the incident at Harper’s Ferry, the article basically asserts that all Northerners agree with abolitionist John Brown and his capture of the federal arsenal. At his trial, Brown acted like a martyr, and “to pro-slavery people he looked like the Fiend incarnate, the personification all of that was evil in the North, and the realization of their worst fears.”²² The support of this incident from some abolitionists and the apprehension that the worst was yet to come were most likely the catalysts for the increase in editorials asserting that the entire North was against the entire South. “The Hour of Peril to the Union” (initially from the Providence Daily Post, [Providence, Rhode Island] later published in the South East Democrat) blames the North for all of the tension between the two sections of the country, saying “there cannot be a doubt in any reasonable mind that the bond of union between the Northern and Southern States has been greatly weakened by the course which many Northern pulpits and presses and public characters of larger or smaller influence have pursued.”²³

²⁰ “Does the Republican Party Propose to Interfere with Slavery in the States?” St. Louis Republican 17 Sept. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 9.

²¹ “Does the Republican Party Propose to Interfere with Slavery in the States?” St. Louis Republican 17 Sept. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 9.

²² Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 22.

²³ “The Hour of Peril to the Union.” South East Democrat 17 Dec. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 1.

Not only were anti-slavery Northerners attacked in newsprint, they were also accosted in public forums. In 1858 Abraham Lincoln (at that time a little-known up and coming lawyer from Illinois) and Stephen A. Douglas (also from Illinois) were campaigning for a spot in the U.S. Senate. During their campaigns they held numerous debates on the subject of slavery, and through these debates Lincoln (although losing the senatorial race) established himself as a person to pay attention to in future campaigns. Throughout the debates Douglas accused Lincoln of “being a radical... who wished to abolish slavery in the Southern states and promote racial equality, and whose policies would lead the nation to war.”²⁴ Lincoln repeatedly denied these claims, denying any implications of abolishing slavery where it already existed. He argued that it was too much trouble to abolish it, or the Founding Fathers would have done it. He still felt that it was wrong, however, and wanted to limit it so it would not take a stronger hold. He maintained:

“On this subject of treating it as a wrong, and limiting its spread, let me say a word. Has anything ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very institution of slavery? What is it that we hold most dear amongst us? Our own liberty and prosperity. What has ever threatened our liberty and prosperity save and except this institution of slavery? If this is true, how do you propose to improve the condition of things by enlarging slavery- by spreading it out and making it bigger? You may have a wen or cancer upon your person and not be able to cut it out lest you bleed to death; but surely it is no way to cure it, to engraft it and spread it over your whole body. That is no proper way of treating what you regard a wrong. You see this peaceful way of dealing with it as a wrong- restricting the spread of it, and not allowing it to go into new countries where it has not already existed. That is the peaceful way, the old-fashioned way, the way in which the fathers themselves set us the example.”²⁵

Lincoln was extremely opposed to slavery, although he knew that if the Founding Fathers had been loath to destroy it, he had little chance of getting rid of it. Still, he knew

²⁴ Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 77.

²⁵ “Slavery Should Not Be Allowed to Spread.” Alton, Illinois, 15 Oct. 1858. Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 82.

that slavery and the debates it was causing were threatening the United States, and something had to be done about it. This is why he rationalized that it was better to limit it than to attempt to abolish it altogether and inevitably fail. He was a humble man, and his assumption that neither he nor anyone else was strong enough at this point to wage war against the immoral institution was a shrewd and calculated one. His comparison of slavery to a cancer that must not be allowed to spread is a powerful and rational judgment, and many against slavery agreed with his assessment. Nevertheless, Douglas argued back that the Founding Fathers intended the country to be half slave and half free, and that it wasn't anyone's place but the individual state's to decide what was best for itself.²⁶ Lincoln and other Northerners were ruining what the Founding Fathers had willed to happen, and it was their fault that conditions had gotten so irreversibly bad.

In regards to the necessity of war, as so many Southerners believed at this point, Lincoln stated: "I ask you, when he [Douglas] infers that I am in favor of setting the free and slave states at war, when the institution was placed in that attitude by those who made the Constitution, *did they make any war?* If we had no war out of it, when thus placed, wherein is the ground of belief that we shall have war out of it if we return to that policy?"²⁷ Lincoln was the levelheaded voice of the North, but pro-slavery politicians such as Stephen Douglas refused to see his rationale as they repeatedly attacked the North for being abolitionists who strove to subdue the South. Lincoln made rational arguments (just like many from the North) for his case, but so did Douglas and other Southerners. What sets the two politicians apart (which ironically set the nation apart as well) is

²⁶ "Popular Sovereignty Should Settle the Slavery Question." Alton, Illinois, 15 Oct. 1858. Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 71-75.

²⁷ "Slavery Should Not Be Allowed to Spread." Alton, Illinois, 15 Oct. 1858. Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 78.

Douglas' unwillingness to truly listen to Lincoln's arguments. Douglas listened to them enough to form his counterpoints, but failed to see them for the reason behind the words. Lincoln was not a warmonger. He maintained that stance even when faced with the secession of the southern half of the country in his early presidency. He wanted compromise just as much as the next person, but no matter how much he reasoned, Douglas (as well as the South) was too firm in its stance to go back and think logically.

Another politician who spoke up to defend his position was Senator George E. Pugh from Ohio. In a speech delivered on Feb 23, 1859 he recalled some of his sentiments in earlier congressional debates. A debate over what to do with slaves being brought over territorial lines was taking place, and Senator Pugh insisted that there be "mutuality."²⁸ He argued that if the Supreme Court made a decision that concerned slavery, he would have to follow it because it was law, but Southern politicians must also do the same. He asked Congress to refrain from asking the Supreme Court to reverse its decision about Congress' lack of authority in territorial issues regarding slavery. Senator Pugh also accused pro-slavery politicians of fabricating information to support their arguments, in this case about protecting the right to have slavery in the territories. He noted: "Senator [Mason] from Virginia tells us, however, that the Supreme Court of the United States has decided otherwise. Decided what? Decided that Congress must intervene for the protection of slavery in the Territories? No sir! There is no such decision- there never was."²⁹

²⁸ "Slavery in the Territories." Washington D.C., 23 Feb. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 1.

²⁹ "Slavery in the Territories." Washington D.C., 23 Feb. 1859. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Container 1.

Although Lincoln and Pugh stood out as loud voices for the Union, there were still many others who tried their best to be heard above the clamor the South was making. According to The Republican, the South refused to stop “for a moment to inquire whether Secession [was] a remedy for any alleged grievances, much less [did] they take time to consider the consequences.”³⁰ This source asserts that it is the South that was working to destroy the Union, and this crisis was not the fault of the North. Disunion, according to the article, would not solve any of the South’s problems, and was a treasonable act that was irritating the rest of the country.³¹ An article from the St. Louis Democrat calls disunionists “fanatical” and asserts that they were generating a “hideous outcry.” It also instructs: “let no good Democrat give the least countenance to the sentiments of disunion which now prevail to such an alarming extent in the South.”³²

Even up until the brink of the Civil War many felt that rationality and level headedness would prevail, and the whole issue would be solved without incident. This is evident in the article “The Secession Movement.” Written in St. Louis just after Lincoln’s election as president, the author asserts his opinion that although some of the South seemed to be seriously considering secession, level heads would prevail, and the rational northern politicians would talk sense into the rebelling Southerners. The North was correct and the South was wrong, and the South would see sense soon enough. The

³⁰ “Shall St. Louis Speak for the Union?” The Republican 17 Nov. 1860. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

³¹ “Shall St. Louis Speak for the Union?” The Republican 17 Nov. 1860. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

³² “The Disunion Noise.” St. Louis Democrat 13 Nov. 1860. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

author felt that as southern politicians broke the Union down northern politicians would build it back up.³³

By the 1850's, Southerners were starting to feel that they could no longer live with safety and honor in the Union.³⁴ This was part of the reason why the secessionist conventions fared so well in the years to come. Because the Southerners were under the impression that Northerners threatened slavery, they no longer felt that their way of life was secure, and they did not want to stand idly by and watch their world crumble around them, as they felt it most certainly would if they did nothing to stop it. The 11 southern states that seceded from the Union blamed their disunion on the election of Lincoln to the presidency in 1860.³⁵ Their attempt to secede from the Union at this point was seen as the secessionists' "last gamble" which, much to their delight, paid off.³⁶ An article from the St. Louis newspaper The Republican observed this, and noted that the "attempt to break up the Union...for no better reason than that a sectional President has been elected, cannot be defended by any person in his right mind."³⁷ Still, no matter how much the South declared that the movement to secession was because of a Republican president the evidence shows that although it was the starting point for the success of the secession conventions it was not the reason why 11 states left the Union. In the South, counties with higher slave populations tended to vote for secession more than counties with lower slave populations. For example, in the lower South, the vote for secession was 4:1 where

³³ "The Secession Movement." Daily Democrat 13 Nov. 1860. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 1.

³⁴ Dudley, William, ed. The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1995, p. 26.

³⁵ Stokesbury, James L. A Short History of the Civil War. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1995, p. 26.

³⁶ Freehling, William W. The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, p. viii.

³⁷ "Shall St. Louis Speak for the Union?" The Republican 17 Nov. 1860. Western Reserve Historical Society, MS No. 3194, Oversize Folder 11.

the slave population was 62.5 percent or higher of the total population. In places where the slave population was less than 25 percent the vote for secession was 2:1. In the upper South the vote for secession was 2:1 where slave populations were 50 percent or higher, and the vote was against secession 2:1 in counties where the slave population was less than 12.5 percent of the total population.³⁸ The South seceded from the Union because they believed that the North was working to destroy slavery, and consequently the South. Because secession was proposed as the optimal solution (break ties with those who threaten the state's security) those afraid of the widespread abolition of slavery chose secession, and the more slaves in an area, the more the Southerner wanted to protect their control over said slaves.

Even from the earliest days of the United States, when the time for unity was imminent for the fledgling country to take hold as a superpower of the globe, the nation stood divided. When the South met with opposition because many people opposed slavery and wanted it limited (such as politicians like Abraham Lincoln and Charles Sumner) the South started taking the debates on representation personally, thinking that the North aimed to abolish slavery, which would ruin the South. It was at this point when arguments from the South became aggressive. By accusing the North of attempting to control the South, the debates transformed from a problem with representation to a power struggle and then began building in force the longer the struggle ensued. Newspapers show that the intensity of the resentment and anger felt toward the North grew as time drew nearer and nearer to the secession of the South from the Union, and despite the North's best efforts the South's unhappiness and sense that their security was threatened did not subside, and erupted into the Civil War.

³⁸ Wooster, Ralph A. The Secession Conventions of the South. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962, p. 260-266.

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