

The Civil War:

A Question of Causes



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Amn fighting because youre down here.@

- Thomas B. Webber, Confederate Soldier, in
response to a question from a Federal soldier ¹

The cause of the American Civil War has been debated even before the war began, and shows no signs of abating. Discussions about the irrepressible conflict to come were present and ongoing long before the shooting started.² After examining even a few of the wide range of possible causes, it would seem that reality lies in the combination of various forces, opinions, moral and ethical beliefs, and political stances, all of which served as contributing factors. It has been suggested one could follow a triangular structural pattern in order to form a more cogent paper, with points of reference forming the base, two main arguments or stances forming the sides, and the pinnacle representing the question at hand. A truly representative diagram for a question such as the cause or causes of the Civil War would more properly be a three-dimensional tetrahedron, or pyramid, or a more complicated (perhaps even non-Euclidian) solid. The areas of conflict are inextricably linked together; any discussion of slavery must include economic aspects, economic differences are at the root of political conflicts, and political ideas lead to Constitutional questions. However, to examine all possible causes would be far beyond the scope of this paper; consequently, the discussion will be limited to a more manageable discussion of two of the more important aspects of the road to war - the economic differences between North and South or the question of states rights and the preservation of the Union. Gerald Gunderson has presented an argument in his article *The Origin of the American Civil War* which attempts to determine the war's causes through an economic treatment. Others have a more open viewpoint.

Both of these possibilities have had, and still have, their adherents. Gunderson comes down strongly on the side of economics as the cause of the conflict.³ Charles A. and Mary Beard lean heavily to the economic side, as do Algie M. Simons and Louis M. Hacker.⁴ On the other hand, in *The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism*, Frank L. Owsley argues that sectionalism was to blame.⁵ In *South Carolina's Declaration of the Causes of Secession* the word *economics* does not appear. *Property* is mentioned once, as is *commerce*, but *sovereignty*, *independence*, and like terms are used repeatedly.⁶ And in *A Constitutional View* by the Vice-President of the Confederacy Alexander H. Stephens, the author leaves no doubt that, in his opinion, the war was fought A.. between the supporters of a strictly Federative Government, on the one side, and a thoroughly National one, on the other.⁷ Clearly, there are numerous opposing opinions on this question.

Out of all sources consulted for this paper, the most scientific argument was made by Gunderson in *The Origin of the American Civil War*. It was also the one that seemed most narrow in its treatment of the possible causes. Gunderson seems to be willing to reduce all aspects of the conflict into purely economic terms. Slavery, politics, public opinion - all are deemed driven almost solely by economic concerns. Unfortunately, after a time he travels beyond the ordinary reader's comprehension in his use of economic calculations, symbolism, and jargon to present his ideas. While surely this is a failing on the part of the reader, more of an attempt to make his argument comprehensible to the average person would have been much appreciated.⁸ However, by focusing on his results rather than his methods, it is still certainly possible to understand his conclusions. Gunderson reaches three:

First, slaves were profitable investments to southern owners; that is, they repaid as high a rate of pecuniary return as available alternative uses of capital. Slavery can

be explained entirely by its monetary return without reference to other objectives which might have encouraged slave ownership. *Second*, slavery was viable. In the absence of emancipation by such forces as the Civil War, it would have been economically profitable indefinitely. *Third*, because slavery was an attractive employment of capital and was expected to remain so, an enormous vested interest had been developed in its ownership by 1860.⁹

Based on these three conclusions, a fourth would also be obvious: slavery was above all, at least for the South, thought of in terms of economics. The economic problems of a Southerner were, no doubt, of little concern to a Northern abolitionist, but the fact remains that money and slavery were bonded as one.

Gunderson puts secession into the context of slavery and economics when he writes the following:

... secession can be interpreted as an attempt to alter the political domain such that the large vested interests in this specific institution [slavery] can be maintained. In a sense it was an attempt to formalize in political boundaries the de facto decentralization governing the institution which had existed prior to 1860.¹⁰

Gunderson also makes an interesting statement when he argues that in trying to answer the questions surrounding the causes of the Civil War, the tendency to look for causes in *Athe North@and Athe South@* leads to over-generalizations. He then proceeds to correlate the *Avalue of slave wealth by state@* with the *Aresponse of the state to decisions affecting slavery@* which, of course, also shows the dependent relationships between slavery, economics, and politics.¹¹ As always, however, Gunderson's emphasis is on economics, as the next excerpt should show decisively:

The basic problem is the huge accumulation of wealth in a form which is offensive to other elements of the society. That opportunity cost will be necessarily expressed in some form in the conflict over the institution's fate.

This procedure [of setting up symbolic economic relationships] assumes that

the South values slavery only for its direct economic return. Implicitly, therefore, the use of the institution of slavery for other objectives, such as race control (as suggested by Allen Nevins in his major work on the Civil War, *The Ordeal of the Union*), are posited to be nonexistent.¹²

Such are the dangers of attempting to reduce humans to mathematical expressions.

Other historians would argue against relying on a completely economic explanation of events. Frank Owsley puts a completely different perspective on things when he seems to be almost shouting:

Let me repeat: the basic fact disclosed in an analysis of the economic structure of the South, based on unpublished census reports and tax books, ... is that the overwhelming majority of white families in the South, slaveholders and nonslaveholders, unlike the industrial population of the East, owned the means of production. ...the only kind of influence that could be exercised over [the average Southerner-s] political franchise by the slave oligarchy was a strictly persuasive kind.¹³

The notion that the aim of war for the South was to destroy the North or that the North-s main reason for fighting was to prevent such destruction is dismissed by Owsley. He claims that the prevailing attitude among the two sides may be stated as follows:

By the spring of 1861 the southern people felt it both abhorrent and dangerous to continue to live under the same government with the people of the North. So profound was this feeling among the bulk of the southern population that they were prepared to fight a long and devastating war to accomplish a separation. On the other hand, the North was willing to fight a war to retain their reluctant fellow citizens under the same government with themselves.¹⁴

This quote obviously considers sectionalism much more important than economic factors. Owsley goes on to condemn the idea of an irrepressible conflict. If, he argues, the conflict was unavoidable, it means that other, equally irrepressible conflicts could lie in the nation-s future. The

United States was founded on the idea of tolerated and mild sectionalism, but when the concept is taken to an extreme, it becomes evil and must be suppressed.¹⁵

Owsley also claims three manifestations of sectionalism which were most disruptive in nature:

1. The habit of the dominant section to think of itself as the true nation with the interests of its people representative of, or more important than, the rest of the nation.

2. The continuing efforts by each of the sections to obtain permanent, superior influence over the rest of the country by destroying the power of the other sections.

3. Most dangerous, Owsley asserts, was the failure of the people of one section to respect the dignity and self-respect of the people in the other section.¹⁶ Later, he states that the abolitionists in the North used language and held attitudes against the South that were so extreme that the world would have to wait until Hitler and the struggle against Nazism before similarly vitriolic examples could be found.¹⁷

In *A Crisis in Law and Order* Philip A. Paludan also leans away from a purely economic explanation, claiming the North considered the perpetuation of the Union as of the utmost importance. He quotes Andrew Johnson's opinion of the future if the idea of secession were not crushed: *This Union divided into thirty-three petty governments ... with quarreling and warring amongst the little petty powers which would result in anarchy*. Congressman Zachariah Chandler claimed he would emigrate to a country that had the power to enforce its own laws.¹⁸

Paludan claims that not only were economics and sentiment the subjects of discussion among people, but a great concern for the preservation of law and the Union was also very evident. He ties in the Northerner's objection to slavery by pointing out the very existence of slavery and the

secession of the South threatened the Unionists' perceptions of social stability through the reign of law, and consequently generated a willingness to fight on the part of many men. People realized that the only thing they as Americans had in common was a willingness and ability to govern themselves, and slavery and secession were seen as diametrically opposed to that ideal.¹⁹ Paludan is by no means blind to the economic aspects of the struggle. In the prologue to *A People's Contest*, he writes that the struggle between North and South became a struggle over political economy and contrasting social visions.²⁰ Later he lists many contributions: the threat to self-government; the threat to the Constitutional system and everything that is a part of that system; the concept that if the results of an election were not to a region's liking, that region could simply leave; and lastly the contest between the Northern system of free labor and Southern slavery.²¹

William W. Freehling's book *Prelude to Civil War* deals almost exclusively with the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s, but he does an excellent job of showing how that crisis changed many attitudes on both sides with respect to the concept of Union. Economics played little direct part in that challenge of constitutional law, but the challenge did serve to polarize the nation emotionally and politically. He concludes by acknowledging economic effects; the South recognized that the only way that the huge monetary investment of slavery could be truly safeguarded was through secession, but clearly Freehling feels that economics could not have been the only reason for war.²²

Obviously, only the smallest sampling has been done on the subject as presented here. However, a fair distribution of writers and historians of prominence has been attempted, and it would seem apparent that in the opinion of the vast majority it is impossible to completely explain

the American Civil War solely through economic considerations. Admittedly, Gunderson doesn't completely ignore the effects of emotionalism, sentimentality, political convictions, and actual fear, but he places far too little emphasis or even discussion of these important aspects of the conflict. If it were possible to completely codify the causes and effects of the war in exclusively economic terms, could not the South have performed essentially the same calculations, arrived at the certainty that the way of secession led to economic ruin, and adapted its aims to reflect the newly-realized certainties? There were certainly many who warned against a war with the North, but their message was lost in the emotional, enthusiastic and ominous celebration of sectionalism, state's rights, slavery and secession that swept the South.

It would also seem fairly obvious that the North and South were fighting each other for different reasons. In the South, economics probably played a more important part than in the North, which would not be nearly as troubled by a war, economically, as would the South. Northern people were probably a bit more high-minded than their Southern counterparts; the abolitionist sentiment can account for a large part of this as can the Northerner's determination to preserve the Union. While there can be no doubt whatsoever that money and economics were very important reasons for the Civil War, to attempt to explain every aspect of disagreement in terms of economics seems, at best, a very narrow interpretation which fails to include the unpredictable and sometimes irrational human factor.

Notes

1. James M. McPherson. Battle Cry of Freedom. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 311. The following is the footnote which appears in McPherson's book:

7. Thomas B. Webber to his mother, June 15, 1861, Civil War Times Illustrated Collection, United States Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.; Foote, *Civil War*, I, 65.

2. Gerald Gunderson. "The Origin of the American Civil War" Journal of Economic History 34 (1974), 915-950.

3. Ibid.

4. Charles A. and Mary Beard. "The Clash of Rival Economies" The Causes of the Civil War, Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 70-4; Algie M. Simons. "The Civil War and the Class Struggle" The Causes of the Civil War, Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 74-6.

5. Frank Owsley. "The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism" Journal of Southern History 7 (1941), 3-18.

6. "South Carolina's Declaration of the Causes of Secession" The Causes of the Civil War, Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 42-5.

7. Alexander H. Stephens. "A Constitutional View" The Causes of the Civil War, Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 75-7.

8. Gunderson, 937. For example, the following is an "inequality" showing the effect of North Carolina's decision to join the Confederacy:

$$.19S_L + F@V_u > F@V_c + .19D$$

9. Gunderson, 916-17.

10. Gunderson, 920.

11. Gunderson, 922-23.

12. Gunderson, 925.

13. Owsley, 6.

14. Owsley, 6-7.
15. Owsley, 7-8.
16. Owsley, 9-10.
17. Owsley, 16.
18. Philip S. Paludan. A Crisis in Law and Order@The Causes of the Civil War, Kenneth M. Stampp, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), 59.
19. Paludan, 60.
20. Philip Shaw Paludan. A People's Contest. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), xxv.
21. Paludan. People's Contest, xxx.
22. William W. Freehling. Prelude to Civil War. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 359-60.

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