

# James M. McPherson, “What Caused the Civil War?” (2000)

## Abstract

In this article, James McPherson, an emeritus professor of history at Princeton University, explores various interpretations attempting to explain the cause of sectional strife. His evaluation begins with explanations offered by the Civil War’s famous actors, and extends through the major schools of historical thought. Along the way, McPherson considers the meaning of important concepts such as territorial expansion, economics, white supremacy, Southern heritage, and states’ rights.

## Introduction

In the 1860s, few people in either North or South would have dissented from Abraham Lincoln’s statement, in his second inaugural address, that slavery “was, somehow, the cause of the war.”<sup>1</sup> After all, had not Jefferson Davis, a large slaveholder, justified secession in 1861 as an act of self-defense against the Lincoln administration, whose policy of excluding slavery from the territories would make “property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless ... thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars”?<sup>2</sup> And had not the new vice president of the Confederate States of America, Alexander H. Stephens, said in a speech at Savannah on March 21, 1861, that slavery was “the immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution” of Southern independence? The old confederation known as the United States, said Stephens, had been founded on the false idea that all men are created equal. The Confederacy, by contrast, “is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition. This, our new Government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”<sup>3</sup>

After the war, however, Davis and Stephens changed their tune. By the time they wrote their histories of the Confederacy, slavery was gone with the wind. To salvage as much honor and respectability as they could from the lost cause, they set to work to purge it of any association with the now dead and discredited institution of human bondage. In their postwar view, both Davis and Stephens hewed to the same line: Southern states seceded not to protect slavery, but to vindicate state sovereignty.

The South, Davis insisted, fought solely for “the inalienable right of a people to change their government ... to withdraw from a Union into which they had, as sovereign communities, voluntarily entered.” The “existence of African servitude,” he maintained,

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<sup>1</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1955), VIII, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Papers and Speeches*, 10 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1923), V, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Augusta *Daily Constitutionalist*, March 30, 1861.

“was in no wise the cause of the conflict, but only an incident.” Likewise Stephens declared that “the War had its origin in *opposing principles*” not concerning slavery but rather concerning “the organic Structure of the Government of the States.... It was a strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation, on the other.... Slavery, so called, was but *the question* on which these antagonistic principles ... were finally brought into ... collision with each other on the field of battle.”<sup>4</sup>

Davis and Stephens set the tone for the Lost Cause interpretation during the next century and more: slavery was merely incidental; the real cause of the war that killed more than 620,000 people was a difference of opinion about the Constitution. Thus the Civil War was not a war to preserve the American nation and, ultimately, to abolish slavery, but rather a war of Northern aggression against Southern constitutional rights.

### **Progressive, Agrarian, and Revisionist Schools**

During the first half of the twentieth century, professional historians stepped into the debate about Civil War causation with a variety of interpretations. These schools of historiography differed from each other in some respects, but they all agreed with the Lost Cause creed in one respect: slavery was not the principal cause, but merely an incident.

The “Progressive school” led by Charles A. Beard dominated American historiography from the 1910s to the 1940s. This school posited a clash between interest groups and classes as the central theme of American history—industry vs. agriculture, capital vs. labor, railroads vs. farmers, manufacturers vs. consumers, and so on. The real issues of American politics revolved around the economic interests of these contesting groups. The Progressive school explained the causes of the Civil War within this general interpretive framework. The war transferred to the battlefield a long-running contest between plantation agriculture and industrializing capitalism in which the industrialists emerged triumphant. The *real* issues between the North and South in antebellum politics were the tariff, government subsidies to transportation and manufacturing, public land sales, financial policies, and other types of economic questions on which manufacturing and planting interests had clashing viewpoints.

This interpretive synthesis, so powerful during the second quarter of the twentieth century, proved a godsend for a generation of mostly Southern-born historians who seized upon it as proof that slavery had little to do with the origins of the Confederacy. The Nashville Fugitives [also called the Agrarians], [an] influential group of historians, novelists, and poets who gathered at Vanderbilt University and published the famous manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930, set the tone for the new Southern interpretation

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<sup>4</sup> Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols. (Da Capo Press reprint: New York, 1990), I, vii, pp. 67, 156; Alexander H. Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1868-1870), I, p. 10.

of the Civil War's causes. It was a blend of the old Confederate apologia voiced by Jefferson Davis and the new Progressive synthesis created by Charles Beard. The Confederacy fought not only for the constitutional principle of state rights and self-government, but also for the preservation of a stable, pastoral, agrarian civilization against the overbearing, acquisitive, aggressive ambitions of an urban-industrial Leviathan.<sup>5</sup>

[Revisionism] dominated the work of academic historians during the 1940s. The revisionists denied that sectional conflicts between North and South—whether such conflicts occurred over slavery, state rights, industry versus agriculture, or whatever—were genuinely divisive.<sup>6</sup> The war was brought on not by genuine issues but by extremists on both sides—abolitionist fanatics and Southern fire-eaters—who whipped up emotions and hatreds in North and South for their own self-serving partisan purposes. While blaming extremists of both sides, revisionists focused most of their criticism on antislavery radicals, even antislavery moderates like Lincoln, who harped on the evils of slavery and expressed a determination to rein in what they called the “slave power.” Their rhetoric goaded the South into a defensive response that finally caused Southern states to secede to get free from the incessant pressure of these self-righteous Yankee zealots. Revisionism thus tended to portray Southern whites, even the fire-eaters, as victims reacting to Northern attacks; it was truly a war of Northern aggression.

### **How Slavery Caused the War**

Since the 1950s, however, most professional historians have agreed with Lincoln's assertion that “slavery was, somehow, the cause of the war.” There is less consensus on this matter outside the halls of academe, however, especially in the South. When Ken Burns' PBS video documentary on the Civil War portrayed slavery as the root cause of the conflict, reaction among many Southern whites proud of their Confederate heritage was hostile. “The cause of the war was secession,” declared a spokesman for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, “and the cause of secession could have been any number of things. This overemphasis on the slavery issue really rankles us.”<sup>7</sup>

The assertion that the cause of secession could have been any number of things is not very helpful. Presumably those “things” include the themes summarized in the review of

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Lawrence Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” in *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand* (New York, 1930), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Avery Craven, “Coming of the War Between the States: An Interpretation,” in Craven, *An Historian and the Civil War* (Chicago, 1964, reprinted from 1936), pp. 28-9; Randall cited in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Causes of the American Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism,” *Partisan Review*, XVI (1949), reprinted in Hans L. Trefousse, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War* (New York, 1971), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990, pp. 62-3.

the state rights, Progressive, agrarian, and revisionist schools in the preceding paragraphs.

Of all these interpretations, the “state rights” argument is weakest. It fails to ask the question, state rights for what purpose? State rights, or sovereignty, was always more a means than an end, an instrument to achieve a certain goal more than an abstract principle. In the South, its purpose was to protect slavery from the potential hostility of a national majority. Southern political leaders from the 1820s to the 1850s jealously opposed the exercise of national power for a variety of ends. “If Congress can make banks, roads, and canals under the Constitution,” said Senator Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina, “they can free any slave in the United States.”<sup>8</sup> John C. Calhoun, the South’s leading political philosopher, formulated an elaborate constitutional structure of state rights theory to halt any use of Federal power that might conceivably be construed at some future time as a precedent to act against slavery.

But even for Calhoun, state sovereignty was a fallback position. A more powerful instrument to protect slavery was control of the national government. Until 1860 the South did this remarkably well. During forty-nine of the seventy-two years from 1789 to 1861, a Southerner—and slaveholder—was president of the United States. Two thirds of the Speakers of the House and presidents pro tem of the Senate were also Southerners. At all times during these years a majority of Supreme Court justices were Southerners. This happened because, while the South had only a minority of the national population, it usually controlled the Jeffersonian Republican party and, after 1828, the Democratic party, which in turn usually controlled the government. Southern domination of the Democratic party increased during the 1850s, so that even though both Democratic presidents in that decade—Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan—were Northerners, they were beholden to Southerners and did their bidding.

The importance of this national power had been demonstrated in the 1830s when Congress imposed a gag rule to stifle antislavery petitions and the post office banned antislavery literature from the mail in Southern states. But the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 provided an even more striking example. It was the strongest manifestation of *national* power thus far in American history. In the name of protecting the rights of slaveholders, it rode roughshod over the state rights of Northern states. It extended the long arm of Federal law, enforced by the army and navy, into *Northern* states to recover escaped slaves and return them to their owners. Southern congressmen voted almost unanimously for this law. Senator Jefferson Davis, who later insisted that the Confederacy fought for the principle of state sovereignty, voted with enthusiasm for the Fugitive Slave Law. When Northern state legislatures and courts invoked state rights and individual liberties against this federal law, the U.S. Supreme Court with its majority of Southern justices reaffirmed the supremacy of national law to protect slavery (*Ableman v. Booth*, 1859).

Slaves were the principal form of wealth in the South. The market value of the four million slaves in 1860 was close to \$3 billion dollars—more than the value of land, of

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Norman K. Risjord, *The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1965), p. 242.

cotton, or of anything else in the slave states. Slave labor made it possible for the American South to grow three quarters of the world's marketed cotton, which in turn constituted more than half of all American exports in the antebellum era. But slavery was much more than an economic system. It was a means of maintaining racial control and white supremacy.

The centrality of slavery to “the Southern way of life” focused the region’s politics on defense of the institution. But it was not the *existence* of slavery that polarized the nation to the breaking point, but the issue of the *expansion of slave territory*. Most of the crises that threatened the bonds of union arose over this matter. The first one, in 1820, was settled by the Missouri Compromise, which balanced the admission of Missouri as a slave state with the admission of Maine as a free state and banned slavery in the rest of the Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36°30’ while permitting it south of that line. Paired admission of slave and free states during the next quarter century kept their numbers equal. But the annexation of Texas as a huge new slave state—with the potential of carving out several more within its boundaries—provoked new tensions. It also provoked war with Mexico in 1846, which resulted in American acquisition of three-quarters of a million square miles of new territory in the Southwest. This opened a Pandora’s box of troubles that could not be closed.

### Source

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