

WHAT WERE THE MAIN REASONS FOR THE US CIVIL WAR?

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Originally Answered: [Why was the American Civil War fought?](#)

An interesting paradox about the main cause of the civil war is this:

- Those who know only a little history think that it was about slavery.
- Those who know a little bit more history think it was about states' rights.
- And those who know even more history know that it was about slavery.

A little knowledge, as always, can be dangerous.

If you merely want to know what caused the war, it is indisputable that the *sine qua non* of the war was slavery. That's the short version of the story. You're a busy person, and it would be reasonable to stop here.

But there is a longer version of the story, a version that is also worth knowing, I think, though I am biased in this, given my affinity for geopolitical history.

That said, if you want to learn the longer version of the story, grab my hand. We're going to travel back in time. Are you ready?

Let's go!

Even at the time of the Revolution, the economies of North and South had been different. In the North, wealth was invested in commercial activities. The South, on the other hand, was agricultural. Wealth, here, was invested in land and slaves. Alexander Hamilton's vision for the North was its transformation into an industrial powerhouse that could in time rival Britain, the nation with the most advanced manufacturing of the day. Thomas Jefferson's vision for the South was for a republic of property-owning farmers, property in land, and property in slaves.

There was the recognition that slavery was immoral and the vague hope that someday it would fall into obsolescence, but slave labor was to remain the backbone of the economy.

And so it did. Decade after decade, nearly all the available capital in the South was reinvested into land and more slaves. When a canal-building frenzy began, where did it take place? It was in the North. When a railroad-building frenzy began, where were the vast majority of the tracks built? It was in the North. And when immigrants decided to move to the United States, where did they settle? It was in the North. What, after all, was a propertyless immigrant to do in the South? Buy land? With what money? Hire himself out as a day laborer? He'd have to either work as a slave or an overseer of slaves, a line of work most people who didn't grow up flogging people didn't have the stomach for. And so, the economy and population of the North grew apace, and the South stagnated.

One of the most underappreciated aspects of economics is how much it shapes culture and politics. Let's start with politics. As a Northern capitalist who wanted to invest in manufacturing, the worst thing that could happen from your perspective would be for the local marketplace to be flooded with goods manufactured abroad. What you wanted was for a system that would keep foreign goods more expensive than local ones, which you could achieve with a tax on foreign imports: a tariff. The other thing you would want, in order to decrease your costs, was for the government to invest in what was at the time called internal improvements: roads, bridges, canals, and railroads. This would facilitate commerce by reducing the costs and times of transportation. Goods could be carried farther, faster, and cheaper. More people could afford those goods. And producers would have an incentive to augment production. This would have a stimulative effect on the economy as a whole, as the businesses that supplied the manufactures would also grow.

What I've described is the system first proposed by Alexander Hamilton, then taken up by the National Republicans, who later became the Whigs. In the North, this was seen as a recipe for national greatness. But in the South, it was seen as a set of policies designed to benefit one section of the country at the expense of the other. For what did the agricultural South care for these tariffs? All the South saw was that the goods they wanted to import were artificially more expensive, all so that Northern capitalistic interests would benefit. So, Southerners started opposing this whole system of high tariffs and infrastructure spending. It didn't help that this system was funded by and associated with banking interests, which were seen as corrupt and elitist. In time, resentment against these policies would fuel support for Andrew Jackson, who famously won his battle against the Second Bank of the United States. But I digress...

So, we know what the South didn't want. What, then, did it want? Land, more land, ever more land, and more Negroes. Manifest destiny, the belief that it was the destiny of the US to spread from the East to the West Coast, had a particular flavor in the South. In the Southern version, one of the explicit purposes of acquiring more land was to extend the empire of slavery. If you were a property-owning Southerner, what you feared most was the abolition of slavery. What was the most likely scenario for this to happen? More and more "free states" could be admitted to the Union, eventually leading to an overwhelming Northern advantage in Congress, which would

then proceed to abolish slavery. So, what you needed to counter this dynamic was to acquire more land where slave-powered agriculture could be practiced.

Allow me a philosophical digression. You may skip over this entire passage if you want to get to the rest of the narrative.

Let us briefly discuss Hamiltonianism and Jeffersonianism. We are heirs to both. Neither of these two philosophies was democratic by our standards. They were both rooted in the belief that only property owners had a stake in society. And only a stake in society entitled a man to vote. But the Jeffersonian ideal envisaged a larger number of stakeholders than the Hamiltonian model did. And, over time, two pressures conspired to democratize America, at least if you had the good sense to be born a White male.

The first was competition between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans. The latter were more sympathetic to immigrants and to poorer Americans. They saw that they had more to gain from an expansion of the electorate. The former, who did not want to appear to be the elitists they actually were, didn't stand in the way.

The second pressure was competition between the states for residents. If you were a Western territory wanting enough population to apply for statehood, or a Western state wanting enough population to increase your clout in the House of Representatives, you could attract people by promising that they'd enjoy the right to vote even if they didn't hold any property. After enough Western (today's Midwest) states did this, the Eastern states had to follow suit if they didn't want to lose too many of their residents.

Today, it is customary to see Jefferson as a fount of sagacity to whom we owe the democratization of the republic, at least among his admirers. For his detractors, he was a racist, a rapist, and a hypocrite. He is, after all, the man who wrote that Blacks were "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind," a sentence that was so painful to me when I encountered it as an adolescent that it indelibly carved itself into my mind.

Likewise, it is customary to see Hamilton as the genius without whom the North wouldn't have been able to industrialize. He was the genius who put the nation's financial house into order and paved the way for its ascension as the nation with the highest standard of living in the world, at least for his supporters. For his detractors, he was a power-hungry anti-democrat and a corruption-apologist who unleashed the forces of capitalism into American politics, leading to a system in which moneyed interests could dictate national policy and the poor would toil as members of an industrial proletariat from which they had few chances of rising.

Neither of these characterizations is fair. They were both men of their own place and time, both *representing rather than founding* the political philosophies with which they are today associated. They may have been exceedingly talented, but no single man, however brilliant, can determine the direction a culture or civilization will follow. Slavery would have flourished with

or without Jefferson. And the same can be said of industrial capitalism with regards to Alexander Hamilton.

In time, the nation that would emerge over the course of the 19th century was the amalgamation of these two civilizations: we owe our wealth to our industrial development, and capital still plays an outsized role in our politics. On the other hand we are much more democratic than the founders ever envisaged, and race-based inequality still persists, as befits a society where race-based slavery was practiced for a long time. Latin America offers various examples of the same racial dynamics at work, oftentimes in a more virulent form.

Now let's return to the topic of culture. Southern society was built around slavery. It was much less literate than its Northern counterpart. The society was lorded over by an aristocracy of slave-owners who were resented by politically-powerless poor whites, especially those living in mountainous regions where slavery was not widespread. For the individual planters, this was very lucrative. But at the aggregate level, it was a classic colonial society, where raw materials were exported and more expensive finished goods were imported. The south would ship out its cotton, then spend money on textiles manufactured in the North and in Britain. This meant that even as individual planters got rich, the region as a whole stagnated.

Their books were produced in the North. Many of their teachers came from the North. Much of Southern industry and railroad construction was financed by Northern capital. How was the South to react? Some called for more investment in industry, but as the price of cotton rose in the 1850s, continued investment in land and slaves was too profitable for individual planters to ignore.

In the North, one of the manifestations of the Second Great Awakening is that many Northerners came to view slavery as sinful and evil. Southerners pointed out, rightly, that the Bible didn't condemn slavery. Churches like the Baptist and Methodist denominations started splitting into Northern (anti-slavery) and Southern (pro-slavery) factions. Abolitionists were a fringe group in the North. But their attacks really rankled Southerners.

As often happens when one's way of life is under attack, Southerners started doubling down on their love of slavery. The founding generation had at least had the decency to be uneasy about the institution. But in the lead-up to the Civil War, Southerners started arguing that slavery was a positive good. Many of them started pushing for the reopening of the slave trade. After all, if slavery was good, and it was good and lawful to buy slaves in the United States, why should it be unlawful to buy slaves in Africa? This had no chance of passage in Congress. But Southerners had talked themselves into a position where any criticism of slavery was now seen as a criticism of Southern culture and honor.

With this background in mind, let's talk about Mexico.

If you know anything about the Mexican-American border, you will be familiar with the history of people pouring across its borders illegally, with complete and utter disregard for the laws of the nation in which they were settling. I am talking, of course, of Americans moving into the Mexican territory of Texas. These Americans resented the fact that slavery was illegal in Mexico. So they brought in their slaves anyway. The Mexican government was far away, so could do little to check their behavior. In time, there were enough of them to start causing real trouble. Allying themselves with Mexican Tejanos who resented the centralization of power under Santa Anna, the Mexican dictator, they started a war of Independence. Santa Anna had the misfortune of being captured in battle, and had to agree to withdraw his armies south of the Rio Grande. The year was 1836.

Mexico, of course, refused to accept the independence of Texas. The Texans then petitioned the US for admission as a state. Initially, both the Whigs and the Democrats refused. Everyone knew what annexing Texas meant: war with Mexico. But soon enough, the politics of ambition prevailed, and President Tyler, who had become president after the death of William Henry Harrison in 1841, started pushing for annexation. The election of 1844 brought to power James K. Polk, who campaigned as a pro-annexation candidate and defeated Henry Clay. This was enough of a popular mandate for both houses of Congress to pass an annexation bill, which was signed into law by President Tyler even before Polk took office.

The Texans accepted the offer of annexation, and in December 1845 Texas was admitted as the newest state in the Union. There was going to be a war. Southerners were jubilant. Here was an opportunity to gobble up more land and expand slavery over all the territory to be conquered.

But Northerners, Whigs in particular, were not so keen on this war. Ralph Waldo Emerson issued a prophetic warning:

The US would surely conquer Mexico, he wrote, “but it will be as the man who swallows the arsenic which will bring him down in turn. Mexico will poison us.”

What did it mean?

There was a careful balance of Northern and Southern power in the US government. So long as the nation didn't expand, the balance would remain, and there wouldn't be much to fight over. But with new conquests, the South would be as eager to expand slavery into the new territories as the North would be to keep it out. And the result would be sectional conflict.

The US did swallow the arsenic of Mexican territory, and the poison took hold. In the North, both the Democrats and the Whigs fractured. Anti-slavery elements in both, who strongly opposed the extension of slavery into any territory conquered from Mexico, broke off from their respective parties and formed the Free Soil Party, which would subsequently be absorbed into the Republican Party, after the demise of the Whigs.

Before long, there were fights over what to do with the newly acquired territory. Before long, there was a gold Rush in California that led tens of thousands of people to migrate there. Before long, California was eligible for admission into the Union, admission as a *free state*. Until that point people had been careful to admit states in pairs, one free and one slave.

The solution, for the South, was easy. Zachary Taylor, hero of the Mexican war, one of their very own who owned tens of slaves, was in office. Surely, he would veto Californian entry into the Union until a slave state could enter at the same time. Surely, he would support the claims of Texas on territory that is now part of the state of New Mexico. But, far from being a southern sectionalist, Taylor actually proved to be a Southerner in the mold of Washington, a man who put the national interest ahead of those of the slaveholding South. Taylor supported the admission of *both California and New Mexico as free states!*

The South felt betrayed. Secession was threatened. Taylor told Southern leaders, including his ex-son-in-law Jefferson Davis, that if they attempted secession, he would ride South at the head of an army and hang them himself.

Before things could come to a head, Taylor suddenly died in office, which allowed Fillmore, a doughface—a Northerner with Southern sympathies—to accede to the presidency. The year was 1850.

What is a generation?

What does it matter for a person to be born at a specific time, rather than two to three decades earlier or later?

A generation is the difference between Michael Jackson and Bruno Mars. It's the difference between Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama. It's the difference between the NES and the PlayStation 4. It was also the difference between Henry Clay and William H Seward.

The first was born a year into the American Revolution. The second was born during the early months of the Jefferson presidency. The first believed in sacrificing Negroes at the altar of the preservation of the Union. The latter believed that the South had been appeased enough, and that it was high time for their barbarous practice of slavery to be thrown into the dustbin of history. The Constitution may have protected slavery, but there was “a higher law than the constitution.”

For the time being, the compromisers won. In the Compromise of 1850, initially proposed by Clay, but steered through to passage by Stephen Douglas, everyone got a bit of what they wanted, at the cost of swallowing some very bitter pills. But at each extreme, people seethed with resentment.

Southerners had much to be unhappy about:

- Why had the sale of slaves been abolished in the District of Columbia?
- Why had the admission of California as a free state without a counterbalancing slave state been allowed?
- Why had the claims of Texas to Santa Fe not been supported? Now the state of Texas would be smaller, and its representation in Congress diminished.
- Why was the decision made to leave the legality of slavery in the New Mexico and Utah territories to popular sovereignty? By the rules of the Missouri Compromise, slavery should automatically have been legal in New Mexico. But since its current inhabitants had no desire to allow slavery, this would mean yet another free state.

Likewise, in the North, there was consternation in some quarters:

- Why hadn't the North insisted on banning slavery in all the acquired territories?
- And, most importantly, *we acquiesced to a Fugitive Slave Act? Now we have to use the resources of our states to return escaped slaves to their masters? Now we have to be complicit in slavery?* This will not do. This will most definitely not do.

Political hypocrisy is nothing new. Parties pretend to be troubled by a budget deficit, only to preside over larger deficits when they themselves take power. In 19th century America, the biggest act of political hypocrisy was the doctrine of states' rights. The South did not want any Federal interference in its peculiar institution. That would have been a violation of states' rights. But the South had no compunction supporting a law that would violate states' rights like no other piece of legislation ever had: the Fugitive Slave Act. Thenceforth, every state would have to use its resources to return runaway slaves to their masters.

This was not very popular in the North. People started invoking "the higher law" in refusing to abide by it. Boston was ground zero for abolitionism. Again and again, even after the passage of this law, government officials would be sent to claim slaves, only to encounter massive resistance from local inhabitants, who would quickly help the former slave escape to Canada.

The South was furious. More than the loss of property, it resented what it perceived as an attack on its honor! Cries of secession grew louder.

It was in this explosive atmosphere that the Dred Scott decision landed like a bombshell.

Dred Scott was, much like the author of this narrative, a Negro. Unlike the author of this narrative, he had the misfortune of being born a slave, a mere piece of property. He was suing for his freedom, on account of having spent an extended period of time in the North, where slavery was illegal. After his master died, he had attempted to purchase his freedom from the widow, who refused. He then, with the help of some abolitionist lawyers, filed a lawsuit. A local court in Missouri had granted him his freedom, but this decision was reversed by the Missouri Supreme Court. Ownership of Mr. Scott and his family was then passed to the widow's brother, Mr.

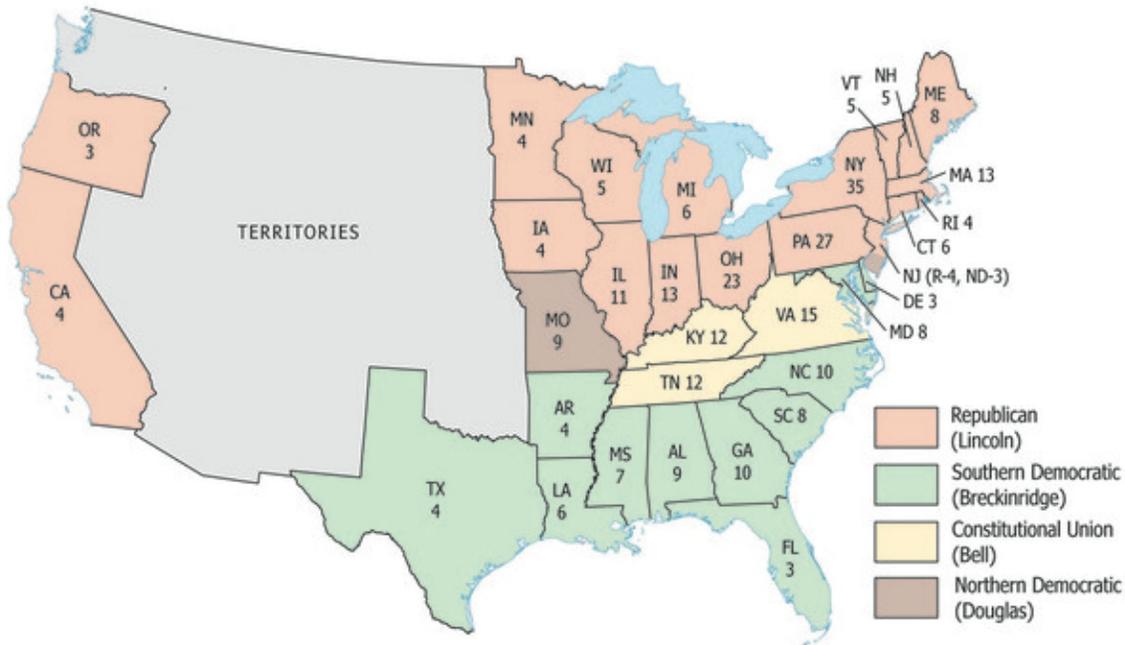
Sandford, who resided in New York. A lawsuit was filed against Mr. Sandford, in a federal court, which found against Dred Scott. This decision was appealed to the Supreme Court.

In perhaps the most infamous decision ever made by the Court, Chief Justice Taney, disregarding the fact that there were free Black voters at the time of the nation's founding, found that Negroes could never be citizens of the United States, because the founders had not intended to include them in the people to whom rights were guaranteed under the Constitution. Dred Scott, it was therefore concluded, had no right whatsoever to sue in Federal Court.

If Taney really believed this, then the case should have been dismissed. But he was determined to insert his pro-slavery views into national law. He further ruled that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, because Congress had no right to ban slavery anywhere. Likewise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had allowed popular sovereignty to determine whether slavery would be legal in any state was also deemed unconstitutional, because it violated the right of a slave owner to take his property anywhere he wanted.

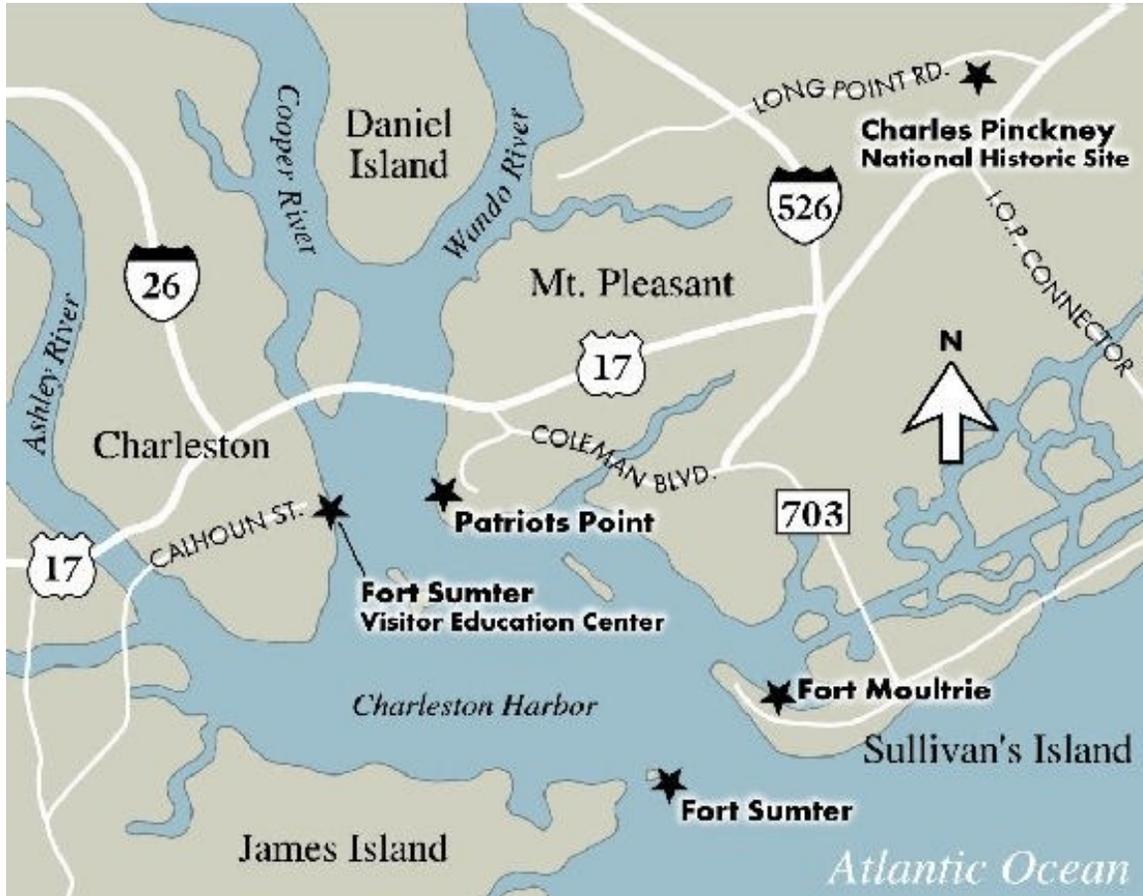
The South celebrated. The North decided to ignore the ruling. Appetite for appeasing the South was disappearing. The year was 1857.

The Whig Party had disintegrated, torn apart by the forces of sectional division. From its ashes, and from a coalition with the forces of the Free Soil Party, in 1856, a new party had appeared on the scene. It was a party explicitly dedicated to containing and eventually abolishing slavery. It was called the Republican Party.



The South, to the surprise of many Northerners, actually started voting for secession. President-Elect Lincoln said nothing. He would keep his silence until he took over the reins of government. Meanwhile, President Buchanan helplessly watched the Union collapse around him.

South Carolina demanded that the US abandon its port facilities in Charleston. After all, this was South Carolinian property, and if South Carolina was no longer in the Union, ownership of this port automatically reverted to the State. Major Robert Anderson, rather than surrendering, took an action that the South saw as belligerent: he moved his force from Fort Moultrie, which was indefensible, to Fort Sumter, which was much more defensible and guarded the entrance to the harbor.



The South saw this, not its subsequent bombardment of the fort, as the first act of the War.

Buchanan was still president. He tried to send supplies, but the supply ship was fired upon and gave up. This was the situation when Lincoln was inaugurated. The fort was fast running out of food and materiel. Lincoln announced to the Governor of South Carolina that he would be sending a supply ship with “provisions only,” and that if South Carolina did not resist this, no military action would be taken.

The Southern response was to demand the surrender of the fort. When this was not forthcoming, the bombardment started. Lincoln called for an army of 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. Four more Southern states seceded and joined with the initial seven.

And the war was on.

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Here are my (John Spritzler’s) two cents worth:

The chief reason the slave states gave for secession (in their [documents of Secession](#)) is that the northern states were not returning fugitive slaves, as they were required to do by the

Constitution. The reason the northern states were not doing it (in particular not adequately enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act) is because there was massive opposition among the general public in those states when the state governments tried to return fugitive slaves or allow southern slave owner-employed kidnapers to return them. Of course there were indeed some white working class northerners who didn't object to slavery, but enough DID object to it to make it difficult for the northern states to act sufficiently in the interests of the slave owners to satisfy the slave owners and make them think it was advisable to remain in the union. Once the issue became framed as remaining in the union or secession, then even northerners (such as Lincoln) who didn't object to slavery did object to the slave states seceding.