

The Road to Southern Secession

Slavery as a Social and Economic System

Since 1619, when African slaves were brought to the Virginia, slavery had been a crucial economic and social institution in the South. Slaves were the main laborers in that region until the end of the Civil War. The South's economy was primarily an agricultural one, with a reliance on the production of cotton, tobacco, rice, and other cash crops. It was the slave that planted and harvested these crops, but it was the slave owner that reaped the profits. Because slaves were in an inferior position within the slave-master relationship, they were considered inferior in terms of their humanity. Racial theories describing the inferiority of the African-American and the benefits of slavery were many:

Slavery is the negro system of labour. He is lazy and improvident. Slavery makes all work, and it ensures homes, food and clothing for all. It permits no idleness, and it provides for sickness, infancy and old age....This is the whole system substantially.

If Slavery is subject to abuses, it has its advantages also. It establishes more permanent, and, therefore, kinder relations between capital [slave owners] and labour [the slave, or worker].

I do not say that Slavery is the best system of labour, but only that it is the best, for the negro, in this country. In a nation composed of the same race or similar races [white], where the labourer [worker] is intelligent, industrious [hard working] and provident, money wages may be better... [However], there are great defects in the hireling [free] labour system, for which... no Statesman has discovered an adequate remedy. In hireling [free labor] States there are thousands of idlers, trampers, poachers, smugglers, drunkards and thieves, who make theft a profession. There are thousands who suffer for want [lack] of food and clothing, from inability to obtain them. ... Among slaves there are no trampers, idlers, smugglers, poachers, and none suffer from want. Every one is made to work, and no one is permitted to starve. Slavery does for the negro what European schemers ... attempt to do for the hireling [free laborer]. It secures work and subsistence for all. It secures order and subordination also.

The slave owner argued that the best form of labor in the South was slave labor and that this system was best for the slave! Free labor, according to the supporter of slavery, had problems that slave labor supposedly did not have, thus making it inferior to slavery. Slaveholders profited from slavery and were in no mind to change the way things were. They felt it was the best economic system possible, at least for the slave owner.

Thus, the preservation of slavery was of the highest importance for the slaveholder.

Compromises Over the Issue of Slavery

The region known as the South was outnumbered in terms of population by the people of the North. Because of this, political representation in the House of Representatives was heavily in favor of the non-slave states of the North. However, the Constitution assigns two senators to a state regardless of its population. As long as there were equal amounts of slave states and free states in the Senate, Congress could not make laws that were harmful to the interests of the slave states.

The Missouri Compromise

In 1820, Congress successfully concluded the first conflict over the issue of slavery by agreeing to the Missouri Compromise. In this compromise, one free state (Maine) and one slave state (Missouri) would enter the Union at the same time, thus preserving the balance of free state and slave state senators in the United States Senate. Each side feared that the other side would gain too much power in Congress should the balance in the Senate be upset. Those who opposed slavery, mostly Northerners, feared the 'slave power' would grow if slave states had the majority in the Senate. Pro-slavery people, mostly Southerners, feared that the existence of slavery itself would be endangered if free state senators outnumbered slave state senators. They worried that a Congress dominated by those who opposed slavery might create legislation restricting it or outlawing it altogether. Southerners slaveholders were very aware of the need to preserve their power in Congress.

The Tariff

In 1828 Congress passed a very high tariff, which is a tax paid by merchants on imported goods, on products that came from Europe. Northern manufacturers welcomed the tariff because it made imported goods more expensive than their own products. Their products would sell better because people would buy their less expensive goods. The South traded cotton with Europe for manufactured goods. These European goods were now more expensive with the tariff. The tariff benefited Northern manufacturers, but it hurt Southerners because they had to pay more for goods from Europe. Thus, Southerners were opposed to any government action whose purpose was to give support or protection to industry. The South, after all, was primarily an agricultural region; it did not benefit from laws meant to help industry.

This crisis highlighted the economic differences of the two sections. The Northern economy was an industrial one, based on the labor of free men. Northerners generally supported government policies designed to benefit industry and free labor. The Southern economy was an agricultural one, based on slave labor. Most Southerners did not support government policies that benefited the interests of industry only. They did, however, support government policy as long as it upheld or strengthened the institution of slavery.

In refusing to obey the tariff, Southerners claimed they had *states' rights*, or the right of a state to *nullify* (cancel) federal laws that they felt were unconstitutional. They also argued that they had the right to *secede* (break away) from the Union if such a law was not repealed. Through compromise, the Nullification Crisis, as it came to be known, passed. The tariff was greatly reduced and no states seceded. Yet Southerners never gave up the claim that they had the right to secede from the Union.

The Mexican War, New Territories and the Compromise of 1850

American victory in the Mexican War, 1846-48, brought vast new territories into the Union. Would these territories become free states or slave states? Who would decide this question, the people of the territories or Congress? Would the balance in the Senate be preserved?

Another crisis occurred in 1849 when the territory of California applied for statehood. California was part of the lands acquired from Mexico as part of the peace treaty ending the Mexican War. Slavery did not take hold there, and California would enter the Union as a free state. Naturally, Southern pro-slavery forces were worried about an imbalance in the Senate.

The result of this new crisis was the Compromise of 1850. This compromise admitted California as a free state, which pleased the anti-slavery people in the North, and included a new law, the Fugitive Slave Act, which forced Northerners to assist slave catchers in finding runaway slaves. This part of the compromise appealed to Southerners, but it angered many Northerners.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act and "Bleeding Kansas"

In 1854, the territories of Kansas and Nebraska became part of another crisis over the slavery issue. Both territories were above the 36° 30' N latitude line, which was agreed to as the dividing line under the Missouri Compromise. Territories north of this line would become free states; territories south of this line would become slave states.

Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas knew that Southerners would not agree to two new free states, so he proposed that the Missouri Compromise be abandoned. He suggested that the people within the territories decide whether to become a slave or a free state. The idea that the people should decide was known as *popular sovereignty*.

Despite opposition from many Northerners, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, as it came to be known, passed. It was clear that Nebraska would enter as a free state, but Kansas was a different matter. Violence broke out in "Bleeding Kansas" between pro-slavery forces— mostly Missourians who crossed the border into Kansas and who were known as "Border Ruffians"—and free-soilers, many who came from Northern states. Southerners generally support the Missouri "Border Ruffians" because they wanted to see Kansas become a slave state. In fact, when a new state constitution, known as the Lecompton constitution, was drawn up, it was supported by the South because it

included the right to own slaves in Kansas. The nation was splitting over the issue of slavery in the territories.

In November, 1860, the Republican candidates, Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin, were elected to the office of president and vice-president, respectively. On December 20th, South Carolina became the first state to secede from (leave) the Union. By February, 1861, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia had seceded too. These states formed the Confederate States of America and made Jefferson Davis their president. In April of that year, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas also joined the Confederacy.

Those who successfully led the secession movement opposed Lincoln and the Republicans. But why? What was it about the Republicans that made Southerners unable to tolerate them or remain in the Union under a Republican president?

ON A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER, ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN COMPLETE SENTENCES. REFER BACK TO THE TEXT AND USE EXAMPLES FROM THE READING TO SUPPORT YOUR ANSWERS.

- 1. What arguments did Southerners use to defend the institution of slavery?*
- 2. Keeping the institution of slavery in mind, explain why Southerners insisted on maintaining a political balance within the United States Senate?*
- 3. Why did Northerners support the tariff while Southerners opposed it?*
- 4. What specific rights did the states say they had in relation to the federal government and federal laws? In other words, what did they say a state could do if it didn't agree with federal law?*

Source of quote: An Excerpt from William John Grayson's *The Hireling and the Slave*, second edition (Charleston: John Russell, 1855). Available:
<http://www.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/douglassproslaveryargs.html>