

# THE OUTBREAK OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND MORAL CONFLICT DUE TO SLAVERY

JUNG JAE KIM

---

---

*During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American Civil War between the North and the South began when then president, Abraham Lincoln, declared that he would abolish slavery. The political tension between the two sides was primarily caused by the southern territories' heavy reliance on slavery to fuel their agricultural industry. The delicate relationship between the North and the South became tenser after Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation to free slaves in the South, which eventually led to the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Ironically, the American Civil War helped the USA develop its power and become one of the world's leading nations.*

---

---

The United States of America (USA) is unquestionably a leader among nations. The country's wealth and power allows it to play a significant role around the world. However, the way that modern-day America was established was not a simple path. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the USA struggled and suffered from internal conflict that shook the nation. Slavery had always been a troublesome issue in the USA and it is important to understand the internal conflicts that divided the northern territories and the southern territories. The North banned slavery, while the South relied on slavery. This conflict between the two eventually led to the American Civil War. The South decided to secede from the North after Abraham Lincoln — who declared that slavery was morally wrong — won the presidential election. In 1861, the American Civil War began, ending with the North's victory in 1865. The Civil War effectively ended slavery in the northern and southern territories. Lincoln's moral stance against slavery was the main deciding factor that started the American Civil War, but it was the country's rapid growth that ultimately contributed to the economic and political problems that lead to tension between pro and anti-slavery territories. Therefore, it seems like these three factors — a

combination of political, economic, and moral conflict over slavery — were the major reasons that ignited anger in the South and led to the Civil War.

As the cotton industry was flourishing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the southern territories enjoyed “a virtual monopoly of the valuable commodity.”<sup>1</sup> In the South, the slaveholders’ desire for their plantations to prosper and expand drove the demand for more slaves. Even though the South “lagged in industry and urbani[z]ation,”<sup>2</sup> the fact that “the cotton boom had extended slavery and the plantation system into South Carolina”<sup>3</sup> shows why the South, especially South Carolina, relied heavily on slaves. Great Britain, the wealthiest nation during 19<sup>th</sup> century, assumed the South was the perfect trading partner to fulfill its need for raw cotton.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, slaveholders in Georgia stopped at nothing to eradicate the entrepreneurs’ ambition to proliferate their industrial economy.<sup>5</sup> The slaveholders in Georgia “did not permit the development of an independent middle class with the potential to challenge planter power.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it was impossible for the slaveholders to consolidate their powers without slavery. Since agriculture was the primary source of income in the south abolishing slavery meant confiscating the slaveholders’ desire to export cotton and make profit.

The North did not need any slaves since they were mainly driven by an industrial economy, while the South needed slaves since they relied heavily on agriculture.<sup>7</sup> Though the northern territories banned slavery it is a mistake to think that the North was above reproach owing to its effort to release slaves, whereas the South was an axis of evil due to its slavery.<sup>8</sup> In order to disguise their evil minds they exported slaves to other nations:

With the demand for sugar climbing in Europe, sugar plantations covered nearly every inch of islands in the Caribbean, and the needed for cheap labor to produce it soared... Sugarcane was [very] profitable... little land on the islands was devoted to growing food for slaves... Caribbean islands became dependent upon provisioning by Northern farmers and other US businessmen.<sup>9</sup>

The northern territories became economically prosperous because they sponged off

---

<sup>1</sup>Foner, "The Civil War and Slavery," 94.

<sup>2</sup>Foner, 94.

<sup>3</sup>Meadwell and Anderson, "Sequence and Strategy in the Secession," 207.

<sup>4</sup>Nash, et al., *The American People*, 203.

<sup>5</sup>Morgan, "The Public Nature of Private Industry," 27.

<sup>6</sup>Morgan, 29.

<sup>7</sup>Holzer, "Confederate Caricature of Abraham Lincoln," 26.

<sup>8</sup>Frank, "The Complicity of Northern States in Slavery," 11.

<sup>9</sup>Frank, 12.

the external slaves.<sup>10</sup> Although Africans played a significant role in the USA's economic prosperity they were still mistreated and detested by Americans. During the Civil War, Africans were not permitted to participate in the war because "[whites wanted] ...niggers to keep out of [the war]; [it was] a white man's war."<sup>11</sup> This shows that Americans detested Africans and did not allow them to step into the whites' affair until "Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act and Militia Act" which allowed blacks to participate in the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

Henry Clay, a member of the Whig Party, made efforts to maintain the Union and soothe the tension between the North and the South. In 1820, Clay passed the law called the Missouri Compromise, which meant above the 36 degree/30 slavery should be barred.<sup>13</sup> Clay's political strategy satisfied both the North and the South, but this solution was only temporary since the USA was expanding towards the West.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Clay revised the Compromise to solve the land issue and to intensify the Slave Act. Clay was unable to pass the Compromise so Stephen A. Douglas, a member of the Democratic Party, altered the Compromise until it was passed in 1850 under his leadership.<sup>15</sup>

A serious problem soon agitated the North and the South due to the Compromise of 1850: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Since slaves were "scourged and abused by [their masters],"<sup>16</sup> they escaped from the South to seek freedom. However, whenever slaves escaped they would be sent back to slaveholders.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the North was frustrated since it was against slavery and wanted to differentiate its policy from the South. The pride they had from not relying on slavery was vanishing and the North was become no different from the South. Furthermore, the fact that hired policemen in northern communities helped the South's effort to capture the slaves<sup>18</sup> was a shock to those who were against slavery.

Unlike Clay, Douglas's main concern was to win the presidential election, not to appease the northern and southern territories. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, introduced by Douglas, was the bill that repealed the Missouri Compromise restriction.<sup>19</sup> The Act let settlers in Nebraska Territory "exercise popular sovereignty,"<sup>20</sup> the doctrine that allowed the settlers to participate in voting to

---

<sup>10</sup>Frank, 11.

<sup>11</sup>Taylor, "A Politics of Service," 459.

<sup>12</sup>Taylor, 462.

<sup>13</sup>Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery and the Civil War*, 37.

<sup>14</sup>Nash et al., 283.

<sup>15</sup>Nash et al., 310.

<sup>16</sup>West, "Tensions, Tempers, and Temptations," 5.

<sup>17</sup>Nash et al., 310.

<sup>18</sup>Blackett, "Dispossessing Massa," 128.

<sup>19</sup>Nash et al., 313.

<sup>20</sup>Pierson, "Bleeding Kansas," 24.

determine whether territories should be for or against slavery.<sup>21</sup> However, his veiled purpose was to connect the Transcontinental Railroad that went through the Nebraska Territory to the West,<sup>22</sup> where the gold was found.<sup>23</sup> In order to seek fortune he split the Nebraska Territory into two, Kansas and Nebraska, so that popular sovereignty could play a role. Since traffic from Chicago had to pass through the northern part of Nebraska to reach the West, he used popular sovereignty to persuade Kansas settlers who — mostly occupied by southerners — wanted their territory to prosper by running the railroad through St. Louis.<sup>24</sup> Supported mostly by Kansas settlers, the South won the vote and gained another slave state; in return, they allowed Douglas to put the railroad in Chicago.<sup>25</sup> As a result, he was confident that the South would support him. At the same time, he believed that the North would support him because he helped the North gain another free state, Nebraska, and develop the railroad.<sup>26</sup> However, repealing the Compromise and voting for another territory aroused the North's anger.<sup>27</sup> As a politician, resolving the tension between the North and the South should have been his priority.

Abraham Lincoln, who later became the 16<sup>th</sup> president of the USA, was frustrated by Douglas's decision. Lincoln opened a debate with Douglas in his 1858 senatorial campaign to present his opinion on slavery.<sup>28</sup> He claimed that he had no intention "to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it [existed],"<sup>29</sup> which shows that Lincoln's priority was to soothe slaveholders' anger and prevent secession. Although he failed to win the election to the Senate, his speech helped him defeat Douglas in the presidential election. When Lincoln was elected the USA's 16<sup>th</sup> president the South decided to secede from the Union and created their independent government: the Confederacy. South Carolina knew that Lincoln would ultimately abolish slavery because Lincoln "[had] declared that 'Government [could] not endure permanently half slave, half free.'"<sup>30</sup> Since slaves were viewed as property in the South eliminating slavery meant confiscating the slaveholders' assets.

Thomas Jefferson, a former president of the USA, and Henry Clay both agreed that slavery was immoral.<sup>31</sup> However, they both realised that tolerating slavery was

---

<sup>21</sup>Pierson, 24.

<sup>22</sup>Pierson, 24.

<sup>23</sup>Nash et. al., 283.

<sup>24</sup>Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 241.

<sup>25</sup>Billington, 241.

<sup>26</sup>Billington, 241.

<sup>27</sup>Pierson, 24.

<sup>28</sup>Johnson, 69.

<sup>29</sup>Schwartz, "The Emancipation Proclamation," 591.

<sup>30</sup>Loewen, "Using Confederate Documents," 43.

<sup>31</sup>Danoff, "Lincoln and the "Necessity" of Tolerating Slavery," 50.

necessary to maintain the country's peace.<sup>32</sup> Lincoln acknowledged Jefferson's and Clay's stance on slavery, but his ultimate objective was to abolish slavery. At the start of the war, he declared that the "Emancipation Proclamation was 'an act of justice,' its constitutional justification was 'military necessity;'"<sup>33</sup> his dream to abolish slavery could only be attained by winning the American Civil War. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863, at the height of the Civil War, Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, slaves were "legally free under the terms of the president's order."<sup>35</sup> On April 9, 1865, the American Civil War ended with the Union's victory over the Confederacy.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes an economic conflict converts into a political conflict. As the USA's economy had been proliferating, the country needed to protect and grow the country's industry.<sup>37</sup> However, a problem emerged on the horizon:

New England and mid-Atlantic states, the center of manufacturing, favored tariffs. The South had long opposed them because they made it more expensive to buy northern and European manufactured goods and threatened to provoke retaliation against southern tobacco exports...some worried that the federal government might eventually interfere with slavery...<sup>38</sup>

To the slaveholders interfering with slavery meant interfering with their cotton-based industry. Andrew Jackson, the president of the USA, firmly believed that states should not have the right to disorient the Union.<sup>39</sup> However, as John C. Calhoun, the vice president from South Carolina, resigned in 1832 and prepared to nullify the tariff in South Carolina.<sup>40</sup> However, as the crisis had been strangling the Union, it seemed that the newly-revised tariff issue<sup>41</sup> was paramount. The new policy finally soothed South Carolina's resentment. The economic and political conflicts were inter-connected; although the nullification crisis started from an economic problem, a political issue ensued. Since the political conflict had already been intensified, the suppressed crisis was about to erupt. This crisis was the prelude to the American Civil War.

The moral conflict caused by slavery also played a significant role in American

---

<sup>32</sup>Danoff, 50.

<sup>33</sup>Danoff, 47.

<sup>34</sup>Nash et al., 341.

<sup>35</sup>Holzer, "How Jefferson Davis Lost His Slaves," 22.

<sup>36</sup>Nash et al., 350.

<sup>37</sup>Weisberger, "The Nullifiers," 20.

<sup>38</sup>Nash et al., 258.

<sup>39</sup>Nash et al., 259.

<sup>40</sup>Nash et al., 259.

<sup>41</sup>Nash et al., 259.

history. Lincoln declared that “he did not advocate or desire full political social equality for blacks,”<sup>42</sup> yet declared that Africans needed education in order for them to be full citizens.<sup>43</sup> Lincoln’s attitude shows that although he was racist, he still believed that blacks deserved to be treated as humans. Whereas Jefferson and Clay had approached the slavery issue in a cowardly way, Lincoln approached the matter bravely because his moral stance did not allow him to tolerate it. Lincoln was afraid that slavery would eventually corrupt moral conscience.<sup>44</sup> From his perspective, slavery stemmed from human greed and selfishness.<sup>45</sup> The South was against Lincoln’s moral stance and waged the Civil War.

The political conflicts between pro- and anti-slavery territories led to the American Civil War. The political, economic, and moral conflict was so intense that a peace negotiation between the North and South was impossible. Ironically, the war helped the USA develop an industrial-capitalist economy, removing slavery to its future expansion. If the Union had lost the American Civil War then the Confederacy might have engulfed the northern territories and shaped them into agriculturally dependent states. This could have delayed the USA’s urbanization. When toddlers try to walk they will undoubtedly fail multiple times before they can stand on their own; however, toddlers’ failures are the steps they need to take so that they can walk properly. Similarly, in order for a country to prosper it needs to face failures. The United States of America was only able to grow into a leading nation because it was able to successfully overcome the challenges it faced.

---

<sup>42</sup>Johnson, 70.

<sup>43</sup>Danoff, 62.

<sup>44</sup>Danoff, 55.

<sup>45</sup>Danoff, 50.

---

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BILLINGTON, RAY ALLEN. *Westward Expansion*, 6th ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.
- BLACKETT, R. J. M. "Dispossessing Massa: Fugitive Slaves and the Politics of Slavery After 1850." *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 2 (2009): 119-136.
- DANOFF, BRIAN. "Lincoln and the "Necessity" of Tolerating Slavery before the Civil War." *The Review of Politics* 77, no. 1 (2015): 47-71.
- FONER, ERIC. "The Civil War and Slavery: A Response." *Historical Materialism* 19, no.4 (2011): 92-98.
- FRANK, JENIFER. "The Complicity of Northern States in Slavery." *Agora* 45, no. 1 (2010): 11-16.
- HOLZER, HAROLD. "Confederate Caricature of Abraham Lincoln." *Illinois Historical Journal* 80, no. 1 (1987) 23-36.
- HOLZER, HAROLD. "How Jefferson Davis Lost His Slaves." *America's Civil War* 26, no. 3 (2013): 22-24.
- JOHNSON, P. MICHAEL. *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery and the Civil War: Selected Writing and Speeches*. Boston, United States: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001.
- LOEWEN, JAMES W. "Using Confederate Documents to Teach About Secession, Slavery, and the Origins of the Civil War." *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 2 (2011): 35-44.
- MEADWELL, HUDSON, and LAWRENCE M. ANDERSON. "Sequence and Strategy in the Secession of the American South." *Theory and Society* 37, no. 3 (2008): 199-227.
- MORGAN, CHAD. "The Public Nature of Private Industry in Confederate Georgia." *Civil War History* 50, no. 1 (2004): 27-46.
- NASH, GARY B., JULIE ROY JEFFREY, JOHN R. HOWE, ALLAN M. WINKLER, ALLEN FREEMAN DAVIS, CHARLENE MIRES, PETER J. FREDERICK, and CARLA GARDINA PESTANA. *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 8th ed., Edited by Gary B. Nash and Julie Roy Jeffrey. Boston: Pearson, 2017.
- PIERSON, PARKE. "Bleeding Kansas." *America's Civil War* 22, no. 3 (2009): 24.
- SCHWARTZ, BARRY. "The Emancipation Proclamation: Lincoln's Many Second Thoughts." *Society* 52, no. 6 (2015): 590-603.
- TAYLOR, BRIAN. "A Politics of Service: Black Northerners' Debates Over Enlistment in the American Civil War." *Civil War History* 58, no. 4 (2012): 451-480.
- WEISBERGER, BERNARD A. "The Nullifiers." *American Heritage* 46, no. 6 (1995): 20.

WEST, EMILY. "Tensions, Tempers, and Temptations: Marital Discord among Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina." *American Nineteenth Century History* 5, no. 2 (2004): 1-18.

---