



A common assumption to explain the cause of the American Civil War was that the North was no longer willing to tolerate slavery as being part of the fabric of US society and that the political power brokers in Washington were planning to abolish slavery throughout the Union. Therefore for many people slavery is the key issue to explain the causes of the American Civil War. However, it is not as simple as this and slavery, while a major issue, was not the only issue that pushed American into the 'Great American Tragedy'. By April 1861, slavery had become inextricably entwined with state rights, the power of the federal government over the states, the South's 'way of life' etc. – all of which made a major contribution to the causes of the American Civil War.

By 1860 America could not be seen as being a homogenous society. Clearly defined areas could be identified that had different outlooks and different values. This was later to be seen in the North versus South divide that created the two sides in the war.

The South was an agricultural region where cotton and tobacco were the main backbone to the region's economic strength. The area relied on exports to markets in Western Europe and the class structure that could be found in the UK, for example, was mimicked in the southern states. The local plantation owner was a 'king' within his own area and locals would be deferential towards such men. The whole structure was portrayed in 'Gone With The Wind'; a strictly Christian society that had men at the top while those underneath were expected and required to accept their social status. Social advancement was possible but invariably it was done within the senior families of a state, who were the economic, political and legal brokers of their state on behalf of the people in that state. Within this structure was the wealth that these families had accrued. It cannot be denied that a huge part of this wealth came from the fact that the plantation owners oriented the work on their plantations around slave labour. As abhorrent as it may be to those in the C21st, slavery was simply seen as part of the southern way of life. Without slavery, the economic clout of these premier families would have been seriously dented and those they employed and paid – local people who would have recognised how important the local plantation owner was to their own well-being – simply accepted this as 'how it is'. When the dark clouds of war gathered in 1860-61, many in the South saw their very way of life being threatened. Part of that was slavery but it was not the only part.

The North was almost in complete contrast to the South. In the lead up to April 1861, the North was industrialising at a very fast rate. Entrepreneurs were accepted and, in fact, were seen as being vital to the further industrial development of America. You did not have to stay in your social place and social mobility was common. For example, Samuel Colt was born in Connecticut into a relatively poor background. He had an inauspicious start to his life but ended up a very rich man who left his wife \$15 million in his will. Whether he could have done this in the South is a moot topic. It was always possible but most of America's premier entrepreneurs based themselves in the North where the straitjacket of social class was weaker. Cornelius Vanderbilt is another example. Whether a man who came from the Netherlands could have forced his way into the social hierarchy of the South is again a question open to debate. The North was also a cosmopolitan mixture of nationalities and religions – far more so than the South. There can be little doubt that there were important groups in the North that were anti-slavery and wanted its abolition throughout the Union. However, there were also groups that were ambivalent and those who knew that the North's economic development was based not only on entrepreneurial skills but also on the input of poorly paid workers who were not slaves but lived lives not totally removed from those in the South. While they had their freedom and were paid, their lifestyle was at best very harsh.

While the two sides that made up the American Civil War were apart in many areas, it became worse when the perception in the South was that the North would try to impose its values on the South.

In 1832, South Carolina passed an act that declared that Federal tariff legislation of 1828 and 1832 could not be enforced onto states and that after February 1st 1833 the tariffs would not be recognised in the state. This brought South Carolina into direct conflict with the Federal government in Washington DC. Congress pushed through the Force Bill that enabled the President to use military force to bring any state into line with regards to implementing Federal law. On this occasion the threat of military force worked. People in South Carolina vowed, however, it would be the last time.

It was now that slavery became mixed up with state rights – just how much power a state had compared to federal authority. State rights became intermingled with slavery. The key issue was whether slavery would be allowed in the newly created states that were joining the Union. This dispute further developed with the ‘Louisiana Purchase’ of 1803 whereby Kansas, among others, was purchased by the federal government. Kansas was officially opened to settlement in 1854 and there was a rush to settle in the state between those who supported slavery and those who opposed it. The state became a place of violence between the two groups and Kansas got the nickname ‘Bleeding Kansas’ in recognition of what was going on there. However on January 29th 1861, Kansas was admitted to the Union as a slave-free state. Many in the traditional slave states saw this as the first step towards abolishing slavery throughout the Union and thus the destruction of the southern way of life.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20th 1860, the first state to do so, it was a sign that the state no longer felt part of the United States of America and that America as an entity was being dominated by a federal government ensconced in the views of the North. Whether this was true or not, is not relevant as it was felt to be true by many South Carolinians. The secession of South Carolina pushed other southern states into doing the same. With such a background of distrust between most southern states and the government in Washington, it only needed one incident to set off a civil war and that occurred at Fort Sumter in April 1861.

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