

# Causes of the Civil War

Civil War: In U.S. history, the conflict (1861–65) between the Northern states (the Union) and the Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederacy. It is generally known in the South as the War between the States and is also called the War of the Rebellion (the official Union designation), the War of Secession, and the War for Southern Independence. The name Civil War, although much criticized as inexact, is most widely accepted.

## Causes

The name Civil War is misleading because the war was not a class struggle, but a sectional combat having its roots in political, economic, social, and psychological elements so complex that historians still do not agree on its basic causes. It has been characterized, in the words of William H. Seward, as the “irrepressible conflict.” In another judgment the Civil War was viewed as criminally stupid, an unnecessary bloodletting brought on by arrogant extremists and blundering politicians. Both views accept the fact that in 1861 there existed a situation that, rightly or wrongly, had come to be regarded as insoluble by peaceful means.

In the days of the American Revolution and of the adoption of the Constitution, differences between North and South were dwarfed by their common interest in establishing a new nation. But sectionalism steadily grew stronger. During the 19th century the South remained almost completely agricultural, with an economy and a social order largely founded on slavery and the plantation system. These mutually dependent institutions produced the staples, especially cotton, from which the South derived its wealth. The North had its own great agricultural resources, was always more advanced commercially, and was also expanding industrially.

Hostility between the two sections grew perceptibly after 1820, the year of the Missouri Compromise, which was intended as a permanent solution to the issue in which that hostility was most clearly expressed—the question of the extension or prohibition of slavery in the federal territories of the West. Difficulties over the tariff (which led John C. Calhoun and South Carolina to nullification and to an extreme states' rights stand) and troubles over internal improvements were also involved, but the territorial issue nearly always loomed largest. In the North moral indignation increased with the rise of the abolitionists in the 1830s. Since slavery was not adaptable to much of the territorial lands, which eventually would be admitted as free states, the South became more anxious about maintaining its position as an equal in the Union. Southerners thus strongly supported the annexation of Texas (certain to be a slave state) and the Mexican War and even agitated for the annexation of Cuba.

The Compromise of 1850 marked the end of the period that might be called the era of compromise. The deaths in 1852 of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster left no leader of national stature, but only sectional spokesmen, such as W. H. Seward, Charles Sumner, and Salmon P. Chase in the North and Jefferson Davis and Robert Toombs in the South. With the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) and the consequent struggle over “bleeding” Kansas the factions first resorted to shooting. The South was ever alert to protect its “peculiar institution,” even though many Southerners recognized slavery as an anachronism in a supposedly enlightened age. Passions aroused by arguments over the fugitive slave laws and over slavery in general were further excited by the activities of the Northern abolitionist John Brown and by the vigorous proslavery utterances of William L. Yancey, one of the leading Southern fire-eaters.

## The Election of 1860

The “wedges of separation” caused by slavery split large Protestant sects into Northern and Southern branches and dissolved the Whig party. Most Southern Whigs joined the Democratic party, one of the few remaining, if shaky, nationwide institutions. The new Republican party, heir to the Free-Soil party and to the Liberty party, was a strictly Northern phenomenon. The crucial point was reached in the presidential election of 1860, in which the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, defeated three opponents—Stephen A. Douglas (Northern Democrat), John C. Breckinridge (Southern Democrat), and John Bell of the Constitutional Union party. Lincoln's victory was the signal for the secession of South Carolina (Dec. 20, 1860), and that state was followed out of the Union by six other states—Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Immediately the question of federal property in these states became important, especially the forts in the harbor of Charleston, S.C. (see Fort Sumter). The outgoing President, James Buchanan, a Northern Democrat who was either truckling to the Southern, proslavery wing of his party or sincerely attempting to avert war, pursued a vacillating course. At any rate the

question of the forts was still unsettled when Lincoln was inaugurated, and meanwhile there had been several futile efforts to reunite the sections, notably the Crittenden Compromise offered by Sen. J. J. Crittenden. Lincoln resolved to hold Sumter. The new Confederate government under President Jefferson Davis and South Carolina were equally determined to oust the Federals.

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