

# What Was the Civil War About? A Dissenting Point of View

By Marc Egnal

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A recent article in *The Washington Post* found that Obama's Presidency stimulated a new debate among local students on the question, "What was the Civil War About?" Good, overdue, and let's hope non-students (and the historical guild) pay attention. For most Americans, as well as for most professional historians, the answer remains: slavery. Put more fully, most commentators assert the war was fought for a noble cause—to assist African Americans. Broad support for this interpretation is not surprising. Americans, like the citizens of most nations, like to view their past in favorable terms. We enjoy reading celebratory biographies of the Founding Fathers. Lincoln stands on hallowed ground as the great apostle of freedom.

Declaring that the Civil War emerged from a deep concern about the plight of blacks offers the most comforting of myths. It transforms a horrendous conflict, with its 620,000 deaths, into a lofty crusade that created a better nation. The only problem with using "slavery" to explain the Civil War, is that this solution doesn't fit the facts. Consider the following:

Although Lincoln's party, the Republicans, condemned servitude, its only policy to assist blacks was "free soil." This initiative that declared slavery off limits in the West. But for land-hungry Northerners the program had a strong component of self-interest . . . and racism. Many Republicans wanted all blacks, not just slaves, excluded from the West.

Before the war and throughout 1861, Lincoln and the Republican Party made clear their opposition to emancipation. Lincoln removed General John C. Frémont, because of his efforts to free slaves in Missouri.

If the war was fought to help African Americans, its aftermath is puzzling. Conditions for the newly freed blacks quickly worsened. Most were forced to become sharecroppers. After a brief period of uncertainty, segregation and subjugation became the rule—even as Republicans tightened their grip on power nationally.

The Republicans, supposedly the party of idealism, soon emerged as the party of big business.

Setting myths aside, a review of the Civil War era strongly suggests that economics, not a moral crusade, brought on the war and shaped its aftermath. More specifically, an examination of this period indicates that the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies was the most important factor producing the conflict.

Between 1820 and 1850 the economy drew the North and South together and made possible a series of compromises. Trade from the Northwest moved along a north-south axis, defined by the Mississippi River. Northern cotton mills depended on Southern plantations. In the South fertile soils and abundant new land kept the planters prosperous and favorably disposed to the federal government.

After 1850 Northern trade reoriented around an east-west axis that began in the Great Lakes region, included the Erie Canal, and ended in the port of New York. The districts served by the Lake economy, along with New England, became the basis for the Republican Party. This large region developed a self-serving "nationalism." Those near the Lakes wanted an activist government that would dredge rivers and clear harbors. They wanted higher tariffs to pay for these improvements as well as protect new industries. This area also had little interest in compromising with the South, and that intransigence would help provoke the conflict.

To be sure, the abolitionist movement grew during these years. But those protesters never comprised more than 5 percent of the Northern population. Radicals, who did not directly attack slavery, but called for the repeal of the fugitive slave law and abolition in D.C. added perhaps another 10 percent to this group of crusaders. Still as important as these individuals were, they never formed the mainstream in the North, or even in the Republican Party.

The Republican platform, which did little for African Americans, included a range of economic planks. These initiatives showed the determination of party members to grow the North. The 1860 platform promoted measures such as rivers and harbors improvements, higher tariffs, a homestead act, and a Pacific railroad.

The South too was undergoing change with the depletion of rich soils and diminishing prospects for expansion. Many planters felt that remaining in the Union would inevitably lead to the demise of their social system. Still only the Deep South seceded before the outbreak of fighting. The Border States (KY, MO, MD, DE) gradually had become more integrated into the Northern economy and chose the Union over the Confederacy. The people of the Upper South (VA, NC, TN, AR) stood between those two camps and were divided in their loyalties.

The aftermath of secession and the developments in the years that follow are explicable once the priorities of the Republicans are made clear. From their earliest days, the Republicans were more concerned about economic development than the rights of African Americans. Hence the long-lasting economic measures that laid the foundation for the modern industrial state. These included higher tariffs, a national banking act, a homestead act, and a transcontinental railroad. Hence also the Republicans' short-lived, half-hearted commitment to protecting the rights of the freed people.

There's no event in America's past that is more important than the Civil War. We must understand this clash if we are to understand our history. Obama's Presidency presents a chance to rethink the causes of this great conflict. So does today's failed economy which shapes much of our current politics. Now more than ever we must set aside old myths. Economics more than high moral concerns produced the Civil War.

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