

## The Gathering of the Storm: the Coming of the American Civil War

It is difficult to ascertain a single cause for the American Civil war. However there is a focal point and that point, as most historians would agree, is the institution of slavery, for slavery effected every aspect of American political, economic, cultural, and social life. The political, economic and social activism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is deeply rooted in the society's long debate over the existence of that institution.

Although the use of black slave labor had been common throughout the British colonies, the impact of the Revolution began a complicated process of legislated emancipation in the North that had no equivalent in the South. As the new nation evolved after 1776, it became obvious the fathers of the new government came from different walks of life, had loyalties to their regions and the interests of such--- two contrasting regions--two societies that possess potentially conflicting understandings of such values as liberty, rights and equality.

Being of conservative mind, the delegates o the Constitutional Convention of 1787 firmly believed in the philosophy Adam Smith--that it was the responsibility of government to provide the legal framework for the marketplace, defining and protecting property rights. These men like Adam Smith viewed economic freedom without government interference as the prerequisite to political freedom. They supported the creation of a new government and the move to the new constitution for they had a personal stake in it. With very few exceptions, the members of the Constitutional convention were directly and personally interested the anticipated political and economic benefits from the new system.

When framing the Constitution, the founding fathers in their eagerness to protect their interests and to avoid conflicts, they granted so many concessions to all parties that subsequent generations found themselves arguing over the true meaning of the Constitution. These regional differences, particularly over property rights and slavery, through compromise, pushed through ratification of the Constitution, through states conventions.

Defenders of slavery could point to constitutional clauses, sections and articles that defined a slave as three fifths of a free person for purposes of apportioning representatives to Congress, that provided for the enactment of a federal fugitive slave law, and that obliged the federal government to squelch slave insurrections. Those opposed to slavery could counter that the Constitution never referred directly to slavery that it allowed for the prohibition of the international slave trade, and that the Tenth Amendment relieved the government of any support for slavery in the states. The point is not that these interpretations led to the Civil War, but instead that the Constitution's ambiguity left it incapable of providing authoritative guidance in subsequent decades when sectional animosity grew dangerous. Southern planters who constantly argued that "states rights took precedence over federal rights and abolitionists who insisted that the federal government must legislate against slavery had equally plausible constitutional grounds for their conflicting points of view, thereby sowing the seeds of sectionalism.

During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, evolving sectional differences intensified. At the center of the disputes was the issue of slavery—slave versus nonslave states. In 1817, Missouri (a new territory, part of the Louisiana

Purchase, 1803) applied for admission to the union as a slave state. Heated debates ensued. The United States' Senate was evenly divided between representatives of slave and nonslave states and there was concern that the addition of another slave state would disrupt the established balance of power—that the balance of power would shift to the South and more slave states would be admitted from the West. The debate continued into 1819, when Maine petitioned for admission as a free states.

In 1820, Congress, led by Henry Clay of Kentucky, settled the dispute through the Missouri Compromise. Accordingly, Missouri was granted statehood as a slave state. Maine was admitted as a free state. The Missouri Enabling Act of March 6, 1820 also stipulated that no slave state could be created north of 36°30 north latitude, a line that corresponds with northern boundary of Arkansas. In effect, the compromise gave Congress the authority to counteract Southern and Northerners who were anxious to justify or denounce slavery and the power to determine wether or not a territory would be a slave state or nonslave state. For many the dispute had been resolved and the issue put to bed. However, a decade later, well organized northern groups of black and white abolitionists began voicing militant opposition to slaveholding, thereby increasing southern whites fears of slave insurrection and the increasing North and South disagreements in Congress.

Yet, these early debates over slavery did little to weaken economic and political ties between the North and South. By the 1830s, the Southern cotton industry had become an integral part of the expanding national economy. In the political arena, the establishment of universal white male suffrage encouraged voters in both sections to join one of two broadly based political parties, the Whig or the Democratic party which

debated important but sectionally neutral economic issues such as the banking system, federally funded internal improvements, trade and monetary policy and the sale of federally owned western lands. Members of the two parties in all parts of the country also agreed that their white skin was what most qualified them for citizenship, there by expressing an intense dislike toward the African American that further cemented ties between North and South.

As long as voters and politicians focused on these national issues and remained united by race and party preferences, the issue of slavery lay dormant. But in the 1840s seeds of sectionalism spread as sectional localities, began to substituted for national loyalties as Whig or Democrat and white American interregional ties of the economy and politics frayed, party structure crumbled and the possibility of war drew closer.

During the 1830s and 1840s the government pursued an aggressive policy of territorial expansion, inspired by the rush of settlers beyond the national borders. Politicians and propagandists called for annexation of those territories occupied by American settlers. Others went further and proclaimed it was the “manifest destiny” of the United States to expand until it had adsorbed all of North America, including Canada and Mexico. Inspired by the notion of “manifest destiny” the federal government pursued a policy of rapid westward expansion and conquest through the annexation of Texas (1845), the Mexican War (1846-1848), and the settlement of American/British boundary disputes over Oregon (1846). After the federal government acquired territories, that today make up California, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, the question slaver holders’ constitutional rights to extend

their labor system into these areas suddenly became paramount. As congressional debate turned to the southern demand for unlimited slavery expansion versus the increasing northern insistence on free soil, voters and politicians took increasingly hostile sectional positions. The neutral national issues that had dominated the 19<sup>th</sup> century political landscape was now overshadowed by the issue of slavery and its expansion.

Southerners argued that slavery would decline as an economic system unless it was allowed to expand westward and to some extent viewed such an action as a violation of state's and individual rights. They resented the prospect of being excluded from national expansion, and were suspicious that meddling Yankees were conspiring to challenge slavery in existing slave states. The Northern countered that, the planters demand for unlimited expansion of slavery threatened to populate new western states with degraded blacks and their "autocratic" masters a situation that would make white free labor homesteading unthinkable and transform the republic into a "slaveocracy."

As the debate raged on, the nation's political system proved incapable of addressing or reconciling these concerns, which many felt threaten the stability of the Union. In the Compromise of 1850, congressional leaders sought to fashion a comprehensive settlement of conflicting claims over slavery expansion into territories conquered from Mexico, and other points at issue relating slavery. This compromise endorsed California's admission to the union as a free state. New Mexico and Utah were organized into territories that could enter the Union with or with slavery. The slave trade was abolished in Washington D.C.. Perhaps the most volatile aspect of the the

compromise was the Fugitive Slave Act, which reflected strong federal action to end the abolitionist practice of aiding runaway slaves. Meanwhile the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, written in response to the "Fugitive Slave Act, deepened the moral revulsion against slavery spreading across the North.

Attempted enforcement of the Fugitive Act pitted the North against it and accentuated sectionalism difference, thus killing the potential success of the Compromise of 1850 as the country become more and more polarized.

In 1854, polarization of the country became more entrenched Kansas-Nebraska territory. The original Kansas- Nebraska bill provided for the organization of Nebraska as a territory to facilitate the building of a transcontinental railroad. Southerners agreed to support the measure if it explicitly repealed the Missouri Compromise and incorporated the doctrine of popular sovereignty—permitting the people of the territories to decide the issue over slavery.

The Northern congressional leader, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, effectively argued, that the terrain and climate would decide the slave anyway and urged that the measure be adopted with the repeal provision. As passed the Act divided the territory the original Nebraska Territory into Kansas and Nebraska. Opponents of slavery denounced the act as a violation of a "sacred pledge" and "criminal." Both northern and southern partisans began moving into Kansas after the passage of the 1854 act, seeking to dictate the legal status of slavery in the territory's constitution. Passage by a deeply divided , the Kansas-Nebraska Act, did exactly this, thereby inaugurating six years of escalating violence and sectional polarization that destroyed the two-party system and drove the South toward secession

Missouri slave holder temporarily moved in to Kansas and out voted the settlers who opposed slavery, thus permitting the enactment of the Lecompton Constitution which guaranteed slavery in Kansas. As anti-slavery settlers poured into the state, they organized a rival government. As a bloody guerrilla warfare erupted, the sectional schism deepened and two party system began to rupture. In 1856, as politicians and the country divided over Bleeding Kansas, the Whig party collapsed and its northern members joined a large minority of northern Democrats to form a new exclusive northern political party opposed to slavery's further expansion—the Republican party—which competed strongly in the 1856 elections. An indication of the intensity of the polarization of the country is reflected in the South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks' assault on Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner on the United States Senate floor.

On May 20, 1856, Senator Sumner, a Radical Republican denounced "The Crime against Kansas" in a Senate speech, in which he made disparaging remarks about South Carolina Senator Andrew P. Butler. Furious over an anti-slavery speech delivered by Senator Sumner, Brooks (Butler's nephew) went to the Senate, found Sumner at his seat and proceeded to beat Sumner with a cane, causing severe injuries. It took Sumner three years to recover, but he was reelected to his Senate seat in 1857 and held it until his death in 1874. Brooks was hailed as a hero in his native state. South Carolinians sent Brooks dozens of brand new canes. The Richmond Enquirer crowed: "We consider the act good in conception, better in execution, and best of all in consequences. These vulgar abolitionists in the Senate must be lashed into submission." Congress made an attempt to expel Brooks, but failed for lack of the

necessary two-thirds vote. However he resigned, and was re-elected to his own vacancy. The storm continued into 1857 when the United States Supreme handed down its decision in the Dred Scott v. Sanford case.

Dred Scott, a slave had been taken by his owner to Minnesota, a free territory and then returned to Missouri, a slave state. Abolitionists convinced Scott to sue for his freedom on the premise that his temporary residence in Minnesota had made him free. Involved in the decision were the questions of whether Scott, as a slave was a citizen of Missouri and had the right to make a federal appeal, whether the Missouri Compromise was Constitutional. The court could have rejected the appeal on the grounds that the Missouri had held Scott was not a citizen and therefore could not sue in federal court. Instead Chief Justice Roger Tandy held that Scott was not a citizen and went on to assert that blacks traditionally had been held to be inferior and that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in any territory. Slaves were property wherever they were. This decision, although a victory for the South, inflamed anti-slavery feelings negated the spirit of compromise and, as some have concluded, was a major factor in escalation toward Civil War.

After the United States Supreme Court decreed in Scott vs. Sanford Republicans' power in the North grew even more rapidly. Meanwhile, the Democrats became ever more closely tied to slaveholder's interests and southern votes. This point becomes particularly clear in the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858

In a series of seven political debates, Democratic incumbent Stephen A. Douglas, and the Republican challenger Abraham Lincoln contest were embroiled in a race for the Illinois United States Senate seat. The debates stimulated intense state

and national interest because the involved the political future of Douglas and because the concentrated on the heated sectional conflict over slavery.

In the debates, both candidates elaborated on their long held positions on the issues of slavery in the South, the expansion of the institution into the west and race. Lincoln was firm in his insistence that slavery was morally wrong and should be put on a course of extinction. He argued that although the Constitution had obliged Americans to give each state the power to control slavery within their borders, each citizen was equally obliged to see to it that slavery did not extend beyond those borders. Douglas, refusing to take a position on the morality of slavery countered that the Union and slavery were compatible institutions. Whether or not a territory adopted slavery was totally up to the settlers (doctrine of popular sovereignty) to decide. Lincoln restorted that Douglas had a hidden agenda---It was his intent to inculcate popular indifference to the injustice of slavery as part of an conspiracy to spread the institution not only throughout territories but into the free states as well, which would threaten free white laborers.

Douglas asserted that his policy on slavery resulted from his belief that this republic was a white man's government in which blacks were entitled only to those privileges that whites chose to extend to them. Lincoln, Douglas declared, was not only an abolitionist and a "reckless " inciter of sectional warfare but also a proponent of racial equality. Lincoln in a tortured response, argued that the equality he claimed for black was compatible with that of white men and did not extend to blacks, the rights to vote, serve on juries, or marry whites. (Echoes of Thomas Jefferson. 'In matters of the heart, blacks and whites were equal, but in matters of the mind blacks were inferior to

whites"). In the election, the Democrats won a narrow victory in wherever it mattered. They held on to control of the Illinois legislature and returned Douglas to the Senate. Lincoln, because of his respectable showing in the debates took a large step toward the presidential nomination for the Republican Party in the fateful election of 1860.

On October 16, 1859, the controversy between the sections was brought clearly into focus. John Brown and a biracial army of 20 followers captured the United military arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia and called for a general slave uprising. Although Brown and his followers were quickly killed or apprehended, the raid and Brown's trial and execution, the nation was completely polarized. Many northerners hailed Brown as a martyr for freedom, while white southern saw his act as the embodiment of northern aggression.

Hence when the Republican Abraham Lincoln captured the presidency in 1860 by pledging unbending hostility toward to the further expansion of slavery. He attracted not a single southern electoral vote. His election however, led an increasing number of influential slaves holder to conclude that secession constituted the only alternative to living under a wholly unrepresentative government dedicated to the overthrow of slavery and to the extinction of southern rights. At this point, secession movement took hold in the Deep South and moved to occupy the federal military installations. Though Lincoln made clear his intention to defend the Union with force if necessary, South Carolina's secessionists turned their cannon on Fort Sumter and the American Civil War was on.