

Causes of the Civil War

The three main causes of the Civil War:

Sectionalism (1),

Slavery (2) and

States' Rights (3)

Notes

(1) Sectionalism: Sectionalism is the idea that the Civil War was caused by deep differences between the two major regions of the country: North and South. Vast economic, political and cultural differences separated the two areas, and the resulting tension led to the Civil War. The North was more urbanized with a larger population and more cities. The northern economy was based mainly on manufacturing. The South was more agricultural, and relied heavily on slave labor for the production of cotton and tobacco. In the years before the War, the South came to believe that the more populous North was dominating the Southern states through control of the federal government, making it impossible for the South to maintain its way of life. This led to growing frustration in both regions, and the feeling in the South that it was necessary to separate from the Union.

(2) Slavery: Most people are aware of the general importance of slavery when considering the causes of the Civil War, but among historians, there is debate about the extent to which slavery was a factor leading to the War. Slavery was a moral issue for many people in the North, who felt it was an intolerable injustice in a nation founded on the ideal that all men are created equal. These people, known as abolitionists, publicized the evils of slavery and pressured their fellow citizens to take action. Abolitionists aggravated southern slaveholders in the extreme and made them feel they could no longer be part of a nation in which their countrymen attacked their way of life. Another reason slavery led to the Civil War has to do with western expansion. The nation was expanding rapidly in the decades before the war and with each addition of territory the question arose: "Will it be slave or free?" This was both an economic and a political question because new states were entitled to representation in Congress (the Senate and House of Representatives) based on population. According to the Constitution, a slave counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of representation, so the expansion of slave territory meant more political power for the South. A series of compromises such as the Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Compromise of

1850 prevented war for a time by balancing slave and free interests, but the election of President Lincoln in 1860, who opposed the expansion of slavery, led to secession and war.

(3) States' Rights: The South seceded, in part, to preserve the freedom of state governments and to prevent individual states from being dominated by the federal government in Washington, D.C. Southern states had long argued that the federal government could not tell states what to do. After all, they argued, weren't individual states closer to the people than the federal government and therefore, more responsive to their needs? The Southern viewpoint had deep roots in American history, echoing the positions of such leading Anti-Federalists as Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson during the debates about the Constitution. In 1828 South Carolina insisted that each state had the right to "nullify" any federal law that it opposed. President Andrew Jackson rejected that view but the South did not. By 1860, the South declared defiantly that states had the right to secede from a union if that union did not serve their interests. In 1861, secession and formation of the Confederacy ignited the Civil War.

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