

## The American War: A History of the Civil War Era

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Chapter 1: Expansion, Nation, and Perception: The Road to Secession and War, pages 5-12

Sectional tensions always formed part of the American political landscape. Delegates to the Philadelphia convention in the summer of 1787 agreed to a series of compromises relating to the institution of slavery, without which passage and ratification of the Constitution would have been impossible. During the decades leading up to the secession crisis of 1860-61, disagreements between slaveholding and free states occasionally mushroomed into major political crises. Yet it is crucial to remember that Americans did not know they were living in the “antebellum” period. That term, taken from the Latin for “before the war” and now applied to the years 1820-1860, came into use after the nation emerged intact from four years of appalling slaughter. Most citizens of the prewar era spent relatively little time thinking about geographical differences and had no sense that violence would soon engulf the republic. Then, as now, concerns about home and family, about work and business, and about local politics usually predominated.

Powerful ties connected citizens across sectional lines, while other factors served to divide residents of the North from those in the South. Political and cultural ligaments included a common language, a Protestant Christianity that claimed millions of adherents, and a shared history that celebrated the revolutionary generation’s successful rebellion against Great Britain. At the same time, northern and southern states indisputably developed in divergent ways that can be traced to the institution of slavery. Historians have disagreed about whether the North and South had become quite separate civilizations by the late 1850s. Were they a true nation? Or two geographical regions sharing common federal boundaries but divided across a political and ideological frontier delineated by slavery?

Often overlooked in this scholarly debate is the fact that substantial numbers of white northerners and southerners *believed* there were troubling divisions. In any era and circumstance, perception usually trumps reality in dictating behaviors because people act according to what they perceive to be the truth—however that perception might differ from reality. By the eve of the Civil War, northerners saw in the South a society fundamentally—and many would have said perniciously—shaped by the presence of slavery. For their part, white southerners thought northerners as antagonistic and meddling people determined to undermine the South’s slavery-based social system. It mattered little whether a real chasm split the nation’s populace. The New York Daily Tribune put it well in the spring of 1856: “The truth is, that though we are but one nation we are two peoples. We are a people of equality, and a people of inequality. We are a people of Freedom and a people of Slavery. . . . These two peoples are united by a bond of political union, but whenever a collision comes which brings out the peculiar characteristics of the two, they are seen to be as unlike as almost any two civilized nations on the face of the globe.” That same year, a young North Carolina cadet at West Point offered a southern viewpoint. “Our manners, feelings & education is as if we were different Nations,” he wrote, predicting eventual division along regional lines. “Indeed, everything indicates plainly a separation.”

### Sections and Perceptions

An observer seeking major themes in American life between 1820 and 1860 could craft a narrative largely devoid of sectional issues. These years witnessed a revolution in communication and transportation that dramatically shrank time and space. The electrical telegraph, famously demonstrated with Samuel F.B. Morse’s message from Washington to Baltimore in May 1844, opened breathtaking possibilities. By 1861, Western Union’s transcontinental lines connected to the Eastern seaboard and California, and in 1858 the first transatlantic cable linked Europe and North America (it soon failed and not until 1866 would a reliable cable be laid.) Railroads expanded exponentially during the last two decades before the war, from just fewer than 3,000

miles of track in 1840 to more than 30,000 in 1860. The telegraph and trains allowed information, goods, and people to move much faster, increasing the pace of life and commerce in ways that left people somewhat flabbergasted. (Telegraphy and railroads would play major roles in the military story of the Civil War.) Population growth also maintained a dizzying pace, averaging more than 33 percent a decade between 1820, when Americans numbered just more than 9,500,000, and 1860, when the total approached 31,500,000. Of the latter figure, more than four million were foreign-born and approximately 10 percent Catholic—major increases as percentages of the whole population from earlier decades and largely a result of German and Irish immigration.

The observer similarly could focus on headlines dealing with significant events unconnected to sectional disputes. Toward the end of the prewar period, for example, the Panic of 1857 and the Colorado gold of 1858-59 garnered massive attention throughout the nation. Part of a wider world economic crisis, the panic hit the North harder than the South and caused considerable dislocation in the railroad industry, agricultural markets, and the banking sector for more than a year. The discovery of precious metals in Colorado, which inspired the “Pike’s Peak or Bust,” lured more than 100,000 immigrants to the Rocky Mountain region. (By way of comparison, 75,000-90,000 gold-seekers flooded into California during the gold fever of 1848-49.)

Despite such important themes and events, a narrative ignoring sectional stresses would be grossly misleading. Any perceptive observer would notice trends in development that help illuminate why the nation confronted a profound sectional crisis in 1860. The North’s population grew rapidly, allowing the nonslaveholding states to gain an increasingly lopsided majority in the national House of Representatives and win control of the Senate when California entered the Union in 1850. Admission of Minnesota in 1858 and Oregon a year later added to the free state advantage. Most of the nation’s new immigrants settled in the North, many in rapidly growing cities that made the region far more urban than the slaveholding South (one-quarter of Northerners lived in towns and cities by 1860, one-tenth of southerners.) Of the twenty-five most populous cities in 1860, nineteen were in free states. The North also possessed most of the nation’s industrial, commercial, and financial strength. Yet a substantial agricultural sector employed roughly 40 percent of the region’s workers in 1860. Yeoman farmers with relatively small holdings dominated northern agriculture.

Religion helped shape northern economic and social life. A vibrant form of Yankee Protestantism trumpeted the virtues of hard work and thrift, while warning against abuse of alcohol or excess of any type. This religious strain helped create an environment conducive to capitalist expansion and the development of an American industrial and commercial giant. The same Protestant ethic prompted many northerners to embrace reform movements that sought to curb drinking, enhance public education, improve conditions in prisons and asylums for the mentally ill, and most importantly in terms of sectional relations, end the institution of slavery. Significant elements of the northern populace resisted the models of reform, purposeful labor, and material acquisition—including many Democrats, urban Catholics, and residents of the lower sections of the midwestern states who looked south across the Ohio River for many of their economic, familial, and social ties. But the North’s political and economic leadership tended to subscribe to the Yankee Protestant ethic, thereby setting a standard for the entire section.

By the mid-1850s, the free labor ideology had taken firm root across much of the North. It taught that labor and capital need not be at odds. Every man in the United States (only white men could vote in most places, and women occupied a distinctly disadvantaged legal position), proclaimed Whigs and later Republicans who espoused the free labor ideology, possessed almost limitless potential. Poorer men could use their own labor to acquire capital, ascend from the ranks of workers to become property owners, and create a comfortable and rewarding life for themselves and their families. Harsh inequalities of wealth among northerners suggested that this ideal remained far from assured, but political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, himself a

remarkable example of how a poor man could rise, painted a picture of glorious capitalist development. “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile,” stated Lincoln in 1859, “saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself: then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” This was “*free labor*—the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all—fives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.”

Many northerners believed the social and economic structures in the South mocked the democratic promise bequeathed to the nation by the founding generation. They claimed slaveholding oligarchs controlled the region and circumscribed potential for economic improvement. For these critics, the South harbored a lazy, cruel, poorly educated, violent people stained by the taint of slavery and opposed to the ideas that would allow the United States to fulfill its capitalist destiny. Because slavery closed opportunities to small farmers and degraded white working-class southerners by forcing them to compete with enslaved African Americans, the free labor ideology could not flourish below the Mason-Dixon line. That failure, argued free labor advocates, in turn compromised the future of the entire nation. As Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts put it, the institution of slavery created “a commanding power, ever sensitive, jealous, proscriptive, dominating, and aggressive, which was recognized and fitly characterized as the Slave Power.”

The slaveholding South presented many striking contrasts to the North. After 1800, when Virginia had been the most populous and important state in the nation, the region consistently lost ground in terms of comparative population. Its networks of roads, railroads, and canals lagged far behind those of the North. Roughly 80 percent of its population labored in agriculture—double the percentage in the free states—and the overwhelming bulk of southern wealth was invested in slaves and land. Large slaveholders dominated the region politically and socially, producing cash crops of cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rice that made them the single richest group of people in the nation. Southern cotton fed northern and European textile mills, as well as contributing enormously to the nation’s favorable balance of trade. Cities were fewer and smaller in the North, white southerners on average less well educated, and southern religion, though predominately Protestant as in the North, more concerned with personal salvation than with reforming or improving society. Abolitionism found barren ground in the South, and by the 1850s most white southerners had adopted a stance affirming slavery as a “positive good” for both masters and those held in bondage.

Slavery served not only as a form of labor control but also as the key to the South’s social order. Only about one-third of white southern families owned slaves, and most of those held fewer than five. Just 12 percent of the slaveholders owned twelve or more slaves, the dividing line often given between a plantation and a farm. But all white southerners had a stake in the system of slavery because, as white people, they belonged to the region’s controlling class. No matter how wrenching their condition, they were superior, in their minds and according to the social and legal structure of southern society, to the millions of enslaved black people. White southerners, regardless of economic status, were made equal by the face of black slavery. For this reason, and because of genuine fear of what would happen should large numbers of black people be freed in the South, white southerners saw slavery as a necessary and generally beneficent institution and reacted very defensively to criticism from the North.

During the Antebellum years, many white southerners held a set of negative stereotypes about the North. They considered northerners a cold, grasping people who cared little about family and subordinated everything to the pursuit of money and material goods. They also believed northerners too quick to judge others, insistent on forcing their reforming beliefs on all Americans, and most ominously, intent on interfering with a southern society dependent on slavery to exert social and economic control of black people.