Cause of the civil war

The Civil War was caused by a myriad of conflicting pressures, principles, and prejudices, fueled by sectional differences and pride, and set into motion by a most unlikely set of political events.

At the root of all of the problems was the institution of slavery, which had been introduced into North America in early colonial times. The American Revolution had been fought to validate the idea that all men were created equal, yet slavery was legal in all of the thirteen colonies throughout the revolutionary period. Although it was largely gone from the northern states by 1787, it was still enshrined in the new Constitution of the United States, not only at the behest of the Southern ones, but also with the approval of many of the Northern delegates who saw that there was still much money to be made in the slave trade by the Yankee shipping industry. Eventually its existence came to color every aspect of American life.

At the Constitutional Convention there were arguments over slavery. Representatives of the Northern states claimed that if the Southern slaves were mere property, then they should not be counted toward voting representation in Congress. Southerners, placed in the difficult position of trying to argue, at least in this case, that the slaves were human beings, eventually came to accept the three-fifths compromise, by which five slaves counted as three free men toward that representation. By the end of the convention the institution of slavery itself, though never specifically mentioned, was well protected within the body of the Constitution.

It seemed to Thomas Jefferson and many others that slavery was on its way out, doomed to die a natural death. It was becoming increasingly expensive to keep slaves in the agrarian society of the south. Northern and Southern members of Congress voted together to abolish the importation of slaves from overseas in 1808, but the domestic slave trade continued to flourish. The invention of the cotton gin made the cultivation of cotton on large plantations using slave labor a profitable enterprise in the deep South. The slave became an ever more important element of the southern economy, and so the debate about slavery, for the southerner, gradually evolved into an economically based question of money and power, and ceased to be a theoretical or ideological issue at all. It became an institution that southerners felt bound to protect.

But even as the need to protect it grew, the ability, or at least the perceived ability of the South to do so was waning. Southern leaders grew progressively more sensitive to this condition. In 1800 half of the population of the United States had lived in the South. But by 1850 only a third lived there and the disparity continued to widen. While northern industrial opportunity attracted scores of immigrants from Europe in search of freedom the South's population stagnated. Even as slave states were added to the Union to balance the number of free ones, the South found that its representatives in the House had been overwhelmed by the North’s explosive growth. More and more emphasis was now placed on maintaining parity in the Senate. Failing this, the paranoid theory went, the South would find itself at the mercy of a government in which it no longer had an effective voice. Never mind that slavery was protected under the constitution, and that it would have been

impossible to make amendments to abolish it. Jefferson Davis, at the time a Senator from Mississippi, summed up the sectionalist argument himself. Speaking, in effect, to the people of the North concerning slavery, “It is not humanity that influences you… it is that you may have a majority in the Congress of the United States and convert the Government into an engine of Northern aggrandizement… you want by an unjust system of legislation to promote the industry of the United States at the expense of the people of the South.” There, in plain English, is the shrill, accusatory language of sectionalism.

Nothing but bitterness and bad feeling could come of it. From such a position it was a short step to the proposition that if a state or section of the country no longer felt itself represented in, or fairly treated by, the Federal Government, then it had the right to dissolve its association with that government. It could secede from the Union. The use of force to stop a state from seceding was, the argument went, unconstitutional, since the Union itself was a creature of the states. It had been wholly created by them. Moreover no provision had been made for such an eventuality in the Constitution.

The Unionist response was that the Preamble of the Constitution stated that the Union derived its power from the people as a whole, and that they alone could dissolve it. President Andrew Jackson, himself a Southerner, had threatened in 1832 to send troops to force South Carolina to allow the collection of the Federal tariff if that state persisted in its assertion that it could “nullify” any Federal law it did not agree with. Jackson’s message to the people of the offending state read, “Those who told you that you might peaceably prevent the execution of the laws deceived you. The object is disunion. Disunion by armed force is treason.” On that occasion South Carolina had backed down.

We see this same State’s Rights argument brought forward again in the 1860’s to justify secession as a solution to what amounts to a sectional inferiority complex. The section I refer to, of course, the deep South as whole. Please note that it feels itself to be a “section”, not because of simple geography, but because its society is based upon slavery. So the problem, once again, came down to that “peculiar institution.”

Of course there was agitation in the North for the abolition of the slavery on purely moral grounds. Abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison, holding aloft a copy of the Federal Constitution before a crowd in Massachusetts called it “a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell.” The abolitionists believed not only that slavery was wrong, but that the Federal government should move to abolish it. Although they were always a small minority they were very vocal about their beliefs, and projected themselves into the minds of southerners as a threat out of all proportion to their actual power and infuence. This threat was greatly magnified in 1859 by John Brown's seizure of the Harper's Ferry arsenal and his call for a general insurrection of the slaves. This caused many of the Southern states to implement plans for more effective militias for internal defense.

While some in the North hated slavery because they felt that it was wrong, most people held no opinion of it at all, and some even condoned it because abolishing it would be bad for business. Without slaves there would be no cotton. Without cotton the textile industry would suffer. To many it was just that simple.

Even in the North only four states permitted free blacks to vote, and in no state could they serve on a jury. Many people wondered what could possibly be done with the huge number of blacks if they were, in fact, freed.

The whole mess went up in smoke in the presidential election year of 1860. The Democratic party split badly. Stephen Douglas became the nominee of the northern wing of the party. A southern faction broke away from the party and nominated Senator John Breckinridge of Kentucky. The remnants of the Whig party nominated John Bell of Tennessee.

Into this confusion the new Republican party injected its nominee, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was a moderate Republican. As such he was a compromise candidate, everybody's second choice. He was convinced that the Constitution forbade the Federal government from taking action against slavery where it already existed, but was determined to keep it from spreading further. South Carolina, in a fit of stubborn pride, unilaterally announced that it would secede from the Union if Lincoln were elected.

To everyone's amazement Lincoln was victorious. He had gathered a mere 40% of the popular vote, and carried not a single slave state, but the vote had been so fragmented by the abundance of factions that it had been enough. South Carolina, true to its word, seceded on December 20, 1860. Mississippi left on January 9, 1861, and Florida on the 10th. Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed.

The sitting President, James Buchanan felt himself powerless to act. Federal arsenals and fortifications throughout the South were occupied by southern authorities without a shot being fired. In the four months between Lincoln's election and his inauguration the South was allowed to strengthen its position undisturbed.

Lincoln's inaugural address was at once firm and conciliatory. Unwilling to strike the initial blow to compel the southern states back into the Union, he decided to bide his time. When a Federal ship carrying supplies was dispatched to reprovision Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, the secessionist hand was forced. To forestall the resupply of the fort the Rebel batteries ringing it opened fire at 4:30 a.m. on the 12th of April, 1861, forcing its rapid capitulation.

President Lincoln immediately called upon the states to supply 75,000 troops to serve for ninety days against "combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings." Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee promptly seceded.

The war was on in earnest. Ironically, the combination of political events, southern pride, and willfulness succeeded in paving the way to the abolition of slavery; a condition that no combination of legal action on the part of the most virulent abolitionist could possibly have accomplished