2011

The United States on the Eve of the Civil War

Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

Recommended Citation

The United States on the Eve of the Civil War
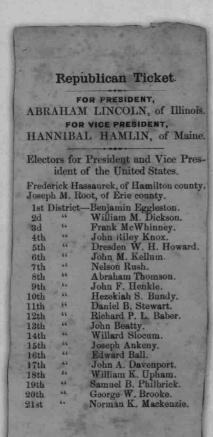
Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln famously predicted that "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Yet, because the young republic had always found a way to compromise its conflicts, most Americans were so confident in the future that they expected the forces of cohesion to triumph over the forces of division. They did not know they were living on the eve of a civil war that would pit the North against the South until it was too late.

The four-year war that eventually descended on the nation seemed impossible only months before it began. Powerful conflicts pulled the United States apart in the decades before 1860, but shared interests, cultures, and identities tied the country together, sometimes in new ways. So confident were they in the future that Americans expected that the forces of cohesion would triumph over the forces of division.

The 1850s were not merely the "antebellum" years, years when everything aligned toward the war. In fact, precisely because people did not know a war was coming, because Americans had always found a way to compromise their conflicts, and because the North and South had in many ways never been more integrated or more reliant on one another, people talked recklessly about each other. With the United States booming, its population racing westward, new territories being settled, California offering bright prospects, gold mines and silver mines promising unlimited wealth, immigrants pouring in from Europe and Asia, almost no external enemies threatening from any direction, and religious revivals attesting to the faith of its people, Americans did not believe it was possible for them to fall into a devastating conflict in which everything, including the very existence of their nation, would be put at risk.

The United States presented a contradictory picture in the 1850s, even on the issue that most starkly divided the country: slavery. No politician in the slave states could survive without defending the institution in word and in deed, no matter what party label he might bear, but some did so with calls for union and compromise rather than secession

Pro-slavery advocates wanted people to believe that enslaved people were well cared for and happy with their lives, as depicted in this 1887 illustration from Harper's Weekly (above). The harsh reality, though, was very different. This 1863 photo of Peter (left), an enslaved man who escaped from his plantation in Louisiana in 1863, shows his scarred back. He said his overseer whipped him so severely, he was in bed for two months recovering from his beating.

*The 1860 Republican ticket
handbill for Abraham Lincoln*

and defiance. In the free states, bitter conflict raged between those who sought to confine the spread of slavery and those who sought to placate slaveholding allies. The Democrats, defending the rights of slaveholders, prided themselves on being the only truly national party by the late 1850s. Controlling the presidency and the Supreme Court, the Democrats were strong throughout the North and increasingly dominant in the South, where opposition faded away throughout the 1850s.

It was the strength of the Democrats, in fact, that drove the growth of the Republican Party. From the perspective of the Republicans, the Democrats gained their influence mainly by fronting for slaveholding interests and coddling recent immigrants. In the process, Republicans charged, the Democrats handed the destiny of the nation to people who opposed many of the things that progressive people in the Northern states believed in: unfettered access to the territories of the West, the use of the government to sponsor economic development, support for education, and the values of Protestant Christianity.

The Republicans, assembling a new party in the 1850s, opposed the spread of slavery more from a concern for the opportunities of white people than from a concern with the rights or freedom of black people. Americans brave enough to proclaim themselves abolitionists constituted less than 5 percent of the white population in the free states; many of those opponents of slavery were women and thus unable to vote. The Republicans repeatedly told the nation there was nothing they could do about slavery where it existed. The abolitionists viewed the Republicans with suspicion, even disdain, but Democrats nevertheless labeled all Republicans "black Republicans," antislavery zealots.

In the decade before Fort Sumter, in other words, the political realm in the United States had fallen into turmoil. Partly because of slavery, but also because of immigration, economic change, and the loss of established political leaders, old parties died and new parties came to life. These dislocations in party identity, in party leadership, and in electoral stability helped foster much-publicized and much-debated crises in Kansas and Nebraska, in the Dred Scott decision, and in the physical attack by Preston Brooks on Charles Sumner in Congress. Those events, in turn, helped weaken confidence in the political system, especially in the Democrats.
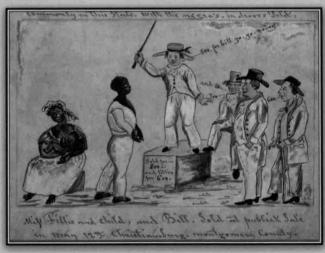
The consequences of slavery for white people defined the fundamental tension between the North and the South. That conflict was not, contrary to long-held belief, a clash between an industrial North and a backward and isolated South. More than half of white Northerners, after all, lived and worked on farms and exceedingly few worked in factories; most were skilled or common laborers in smaller towns and cities. The South, for its part, was the fourth-richest economy in the world and seemed destined to play an ever-greater role in fueling the growth of England and France as well as the North. The slave property of the South was worth three times all the railroads and factories of the North, combined, in 1860. Slave prices had never been higher, and the price and demand for cotton had never been stronger. Cotton, in fact, had steadily become more crucial to the United States economy; by 1860, the staple accounted for more than 60 percent of all American exports and showed every sign of increasing its domination.

The South underwent a particular kind of economic growth, quite unlike that in the North, for plantations accounted for much of the economic energy in the South and the South rapidly replicated its profitable plantation model over an enormous area. In the process, slave states did not generate the population density that sustained towns and economic development in the free states, and to the eyes of Northern visitors, the slave South looked underpopulated and underdeveloped. The slave South developed less manufacturing than the North because agriculture was so profitable in the South, because available capital went into purchasing more enslaved people and more land, and because no structural or seasonal surplus of wage labor was available for factories. Yet slavery proved adaptable to urban manufacturing when the conditions were right; cities in the upper South, such as Richmond and Petersburg, saw enslaved people increasingly at work in tobacco and iron factories. States in the South spent aggressively on economic development, on railroads in particular, and did not imagine themselves as somehow apart from the commercial world that gave slavery its reason for being.

The consequences of slavery for white people defined the fundamental tension between the North and the South.

This circa 1853 sketch of a slave auction was done by Southern artist Lewis Miller.

Slaveholding, while extremely profitable, was virtually the only way to become truly prosperous in the South. That very profitability proved a challenge for the South, because as the price of slaves increased, the percentage of white families who owned slaves decreased. In 1840, about a third of white families owned at least one slave; by 1860, about a fourth did. White people in the South who did not own slaves were deeply implicated in the system, with large numbers of non-slaveholders hiring enslaved workers, trading with plantation owners, acting as bankers or insurers, and aiding the slave trade. Non-slaveholders could sustain quite respectable family farms, gain respect as ministers or lawyers, or run shops in towns, but they could not attain the heights of their slaveholding neighbors.

Mid-19th-century iron slave shackles

Slavery spread across the South, but not evenly and not with uniform consequences. In the 1850s, enslaved labor expanded into the mountains of southwest Virginia, western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee, where it had not flourished before. The slave states of the upper South—from Maryland, through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri—saw themselves as buffers between a fanatical upper North and a fanatical lower South. The dominant crops along the border were wheat, corn, and livestock; they were slave states, not cotton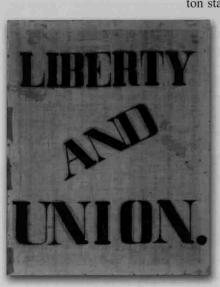 states. The areas within those states with fewer slaves resented the domination of state government by the slaveholding interests.

The North experienced similar geographic divisions. New England, upstate New York, and the upper Great Lakes region increasingly defined themselves against the South, its economy, its values, and its politics. Much of the abolitionist crusade grew in those areas. New York City, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the lower Midwest, by contrast, prided themselves on their moderation. They often traded with Southern neighbors, shared their prejudices against black Americans, and tended to vote for the Democrats. These areas, like those of the upper South, thought they could help steer the nation through any sectional crisis.

This complex mosaic of region, interest, ideology, culture, and party, ironically, helped unify the nation. The more variegated the regions, the less likely that Northern interests and Southern interests would lead to the division of the country that people had feared since the time of the Constitution and the 1820 Missouri Compromise.

LIBERTY AND UNION.

Black and white gold miners in Spanish Flat, California, 1852

As Northern manufacturing grew stronger, the more it depended on the cotton produced by slaves; as Southern plantations grew more specialized, the more they relied on Northern manufacturers and importers. Voters in the cities in the North often proved sympathetic to the South and to

U.S. Military Telegraph Service battery wagon headquarters, Petersburg, Virginia, June 1864

slavery; cities in the South often supported talk of secession more than large planters did.

If the 1850s did not foster an economic crisis between a modern North and a backward South, then, and if the political system contained many countervailing forces, what conditions in that decade created conditions in which the Civil War eventually combusted? Ironically, it was some of the very developments that tied the country together that made it more likely to break along regional lines. The spread of railroads, telegraphs, and newspapers transformed conflicts into national media events. Old-fashioned political speeches, in which local leaders played to their local constituents, suddenly became controversies all across the country. News of events such as Bleeding Kansas or John Brown's raid exploded before readers of newspapers in a matter of hours—the news speeding across telegraph lines only recently strung. Newspapers boomed in the 1850s, virtually all of them sponsored by political parties, feeding a sense of outrage against their opponents across town,

across state, or across the Mason-Dixon Line. Advocates of every party caricatured their opponents and then believed the caricature.

With slavery never more profitable, slaveholders and secessionists did not believe the North or Europe would dare threaten their own prosperity by defying the South. With their populations burgeoning and their towns and farms blossoming, Northerners did not believe the South would challenge the Union. People on both sides called each other's bluff. Impatient with compromise, full of confidence in their abilities to stand alone, leaders and voters challenged the courage and resolve of the other side.

No single change turned these years into the prewar years. Rather, the concatenation of long-term processes and unexpected events created the conditions that led to war. The interplay between long-term conflict over slavery, medium-term developments in party politics, and immediate passionate concern over John Brown proved more volatile than any of these conditions alone. American men surveyed the situation, read raging party newspapers with which they already agreed, and then faced dichotomous choices that left no room for compromise. They acted out of a compelling situational logic that made perfect sense to them at the time but that led to results they did not seek.

The 1850s seem a prelude to war only in retrospect. Americans expected, even welcomed, a confrontation with one another over the consequences of slavery to white people because they believed confrontation would deliver resolution to the uncertainties of the preceding decade. They could not know that they were bringing on a war that would kill well over half a million of their people and that would free four million more. They did not know that they were living on the eve of the American Civil War until it was too late.

With slavery never more profitable, slaveholders and secessionists did not believe the North or Europe would dare threaten their own prosperity by defying the South.

Parks with Relevant Major Resources Related to the Nation on the Eve of the Civil War: Arlington House, Booker T. Washington, Boston African American, Boston, Cane River Creole, Charles Pinckney, Fort McHenry, Fort Pulaski, Fort Sumter, Frederick Douglass, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, Hampton, Harpers Ferry, Independence, Jean Lafitte, Jefferson, Lincoln Birthplace, Lincoln Boyhood, Lincoln Home, Lincoln Memorial, Martin Van Buren, Natchez, New Bedford, Palo Alto, President's Park, Richmond, Shiloh, Ulysses S. Grant