

Why Did the South Secede?

Why did the first wave of seven states secede from the Union? Why did Lincoln force war upon the Confederacy by invading it with state militia volunteers tasked with enforcing tariff laws and collecting, by force if necessary, tariff revenue in Southern ports? Although the two issues are commonly considered together as one issue, they are separate. The

reason Lincoln chose to go to war is not necessarily the reason the Southern states seceded. That Lincoln did not start the war to free the slaves is beyond any reasonable doubt. But the reason(s) for secession are not as clear-cut. It is true that slavery was the central theme in the secession documents offered by the first wave of seceding states, and that alone would seem to answer the question definitively and conclusively. But, maybe not.

If you read those secession statements, you find that Louisiana alone failed to specify the reasons for secession. It simply declared that the state had seceded. All the others spelled out in varying degree of detail what had impelled them to take such drastic action, and those causes are devoted almost exclusively to slavery.

There were two specific aspects of the larger slavery issue that got the most ink. One was the issue of returning escaped slaves found in the Northern states. The seceding states complained bitterly that the North had consistently failed to respect and comply with the Constitution, Article IV, Section 2, third paragraph:

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or labour may be due.

The Fugitive Slave Law had been written to put some teeth into that constitutional provision. The South was understandably pleased with that development, but their elation was short-lived. Yankees despised the law. Not so much because they disagreed with it philosophically, but because it was an unacceptable inconvenience to them personally. Any Yankee could at any time be forced to help enforce that law, no matter how much it may have disrupted their personal life or how much they disagreed with it. So, they quickly found ways to get around the law or simply ignore it without fear of punishment. Soon, the South saw that the law had no effect whatsoever in protecting their property rights.

The second specific aspect of slavery that impelled the Southern states to secede was that they were being denied the right to take their slaves into the territories. The South saw that as a clear violation of the North's constitutional obligation to treat the states with equal measures of respect and fairness. The South had done more than its fair share of securing those territories. Southern men had died in the battles against Mexico, for example, which added Texas and the Southwest and California to US territory. Nothing in the Constitution authorized Congress or the President to exclude the South from using those territories as they saw fit, within obvious legal restraints, of course. What made the North think they were no longer obligated to treat all sections of the nation, all states in the Union, equally?

From the South's perspective, those were clear violations of the North's constitutional obligations. And those violations had been going on for years. The North had effectively rendered the Constitution null and void, and that left the South no practical choice but to withdraw from the Union. The Constitution was no longer a barrier to Northern tyranny and oppression, from the South's point of view, and that left them with only two options: 1- remain in the Union and submit to Northern tyranny, or 2- withdraw from the Union and resume their status as fully sovereign, independent nations. It was sovereign states that had joined the Union, and they did not relinquish that sovereignty by ratifying the Constitution. They had merely granted the federal government certain limited power and authority as spelled out in the Constitution, and now they were rescinding that authority. They had the same right to do that as the colonies had exercised in their secession from England.

It seems rather odd from our modern perspective that the South was so concerned about slavery at that point. It's true that Lincoln stated in his First Inaugural that the right to take slaves into the territories was the only real slavery issue that was unresolved. So, it's easy to understand Southern anger over that aspect of the slavery issue. But above and beyond that, the secession documents make it clear that the South was convinced that the North was determined to destroy Southern slavery. Why? Slavery had never been more secure. The Dred Scott decision essentially made slavery legal in every state that chose to be a slave state, and it was also legal in the territories. So, the South had pretty solid reasons for thinking that slavery was not being threatened, at least for now.

Furthermore, Lincoln had stated, and continued to insist throughout the war, even after the Emancipation Proclamation, as late as early April 1865, right at the end of the war, that the South could keep their slaves if they would just lay down their guns and rejoin the Union. (Even though Lincoln had been pretending all along that the South had never really left the Union.) In late December 1860 and early 1861, however, that had yet to play out, and the South did not trust Lincoln. At all. For very good reason. Lincoln was a pathological liar. He lied so often, so consistently, and so effectively that I feel safe in saying that no greater liar has ever lived, at least not in US politics. Even the revered Gettysburg Address is a ball of bold-faced lies wrapped in poetic phrases. They were such blatant, hideous, contemptible lies that I will never understand how Lincoln, even gifted liar that he was, could deliver that short speech without breaking into hysterical laughter or dying of shame and embarrassment.

It wasn't just Lincoln that the South despised and distrusted. It was the entire Republican Party. They had branded themselves the abolitionist party, and the South was convinced that the Republicans and abolitionists were hell-bent on wiping out Southern slavery. They didn't necessarily think it was imminent, but they thought it was inevitable, and they were afraid that it would be their children or grandchildren who would suffer the consequences. They preferred to deal with the issue now, instead of leaving matters unresolved for their children and grandchildren to deal with.

Again, that seems strange, because the last thing most people in the North wanted in 1861 was emancipation of Southern slaves. Why? For at least two reasons. 1- Their mills relied on Southern cotton produced by slaves. 2- Yankees' greatest fear was that a hoard of freed blacks would rush to the North and begin to compete for Northern jobs and drive down wages. They didn't want blacks in the territories for the same reason, and Lincoln admitted as much. Those were White Man jobs, according to Yankees. They wanted blacks bottled up in the South where they belonged. They didn't necessarily like the idea of slavery itself, but if that's what it took to keep blacks in the South, so be it.

It seems strange also, because taking their slaves with them into the territories was not something that made a lot of sense. New Mexico (including what is now Arizona) was a slave territory, but after a decade, only 21 slaves were there. The territory was four times the area of England, and of those 21 slaves, only 12 actually lived there. Adjoining Utah territory was controlled by Mormons, who wanted nothing to do with slavery. California had become a non-slave state. Oklahoma was full of Indians because the Yankee campaign of ethnic cleansing had chased Indians out of other areas and had them all bottled up in Oklahoma territory. I can understand the South being upset about the North's policy of no slaves in the territories, but Southerners weren't going to be flocking there with their slaves, anyway. Was secession worth it over an issue of very little practical value to them?

But the South apparently didn't see it that way. One explanation is the John Brown incident. It wasn't so much what Brown himself did, but how Yankees reacted to it that had Southerners so riled up. Instead of condemning Brown, as the South did, the North treated him like a hero. Another explanation is Harriet Beecher Stowe's little book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. That had created a massive wave of anti-slavery sentiment in the North, and all over the world, in fact. Its portrait of the harsh and brutal life of a slave at the hands of cruel, lazy Southern slave masters was enough to make even the biggest, burliest Yankee man cry. The problem is that it was entirely fiction. It was in no way an accurate portrayal of Southern slavery. Stowe had never visited a

plantation or even met a slave. She wasn't writing a documentary. Her intent was to do exactly what she did – stir up maximum hatred of slavery by portraying it in the worst possible light. It didn't need to be true or accurate. It was fiction. It was propaganda. And it was a huge success. Yankees didn't realize it was fiction. They believed every word of it.

That, too, was fresh on the minds of Southerners. Which makes it easier to understand why they felt that the institution of slavery was being threatened by Republicans. Yankees and Northern abolitionists had been busy for years trying their best to stir up slave rebellions in the South. They were actively campaigning to undermine Southern culture and institutions. To put it bluntly, the North and South had despised each other right from the very beginning of the nation. According to one writer, secession was inevitable. If the South hadn't seceded the North would have. The two sections had been at odds economically as the North evolved into an industrial society, while the South remained an agricultural culture, with slavery making it possible. They were different cultures, with different lifestyles, different philosophies and values.

That was no doubt part of what drove the South to secession. It wasn't just slavery that was threatened. It was their entire culture, and the hatred had been building up for decades. Still, that isn't what Southerners talked about in their secession documents. Georgia talked about economic issues, complaining that the North's commerce relied heavily on assistance from the federal government, while the South had not. So, the South was in effect being forced to help subsidize Yankee commerce in which the South had no interest. Texas pointed out that the current (incoming) administration had been elected without the vote of a single Southern state, which meant that the South no longer had any effective representation in the federal government and no hope of ever regaining equal strength with the North. But slavery was the central theme of secession. Slavery wasn't the South's only concern, but it was way ahead of whatever was in second place. Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, said it was all about slavery, for which he was severely scolded. Jefferson Davis, Confederate President, in his First Inaugural Address, didn't mention slavery at all.

Again, however, it is important to remember that slavery was not the reason for Lincoln's war. Lincoln did not free a single slave. The Emancipation Proclamation (EP) did not free a single slave. The Thirteenth Amendment freed the slaves, and that was several months after Lincoln's death. It is probably true that Lincoln did support the passage of that amendment. To some extent. But, if so, it's odd that Abe didn't even bother to mention the Thirteenth Amendment in his Second Inaugural Address. That would have been the perfect opportunity to push the issue, but Lincoln didn't bother.

What Lincoln did support passionately and vigorously was the colonization movement. He, and all those in the movement, wanted to round up all blacks in the US, slave or free, and ship them all out to another country. Or maybe an island somewhere. Several possibilities were considered, including Liberia and Haiti. It never worked simply because it was impractical. In fact, it was impossible.

Another pet project of Lincoln's which he pursued passionately was the Corwin Amendment. Lincoln got that ball rolling even before he was inaugurated. He got it passed in both chambers of Congress, and it was signed by Buchanan before he left office. (It didn't require his approval, but Buchanan just wanted to show his support for it.) It had also already been ratified by three states. So what was the Corwin Amendment? It would have made slavery the law of the land throughout the US. Forever. Period. No act of Congress or future Constitutional Amendment could ever rescind or repeal or overrule it. It would have become, ironically, the Thirteenth Amendment instead of the one we have now.

That in itself is astonishing. Why would Lincoln want that? Because he didn't give a rat's boohiny about slavery or slaves. It simply wasn't that important to him. He just wanted to keep the South in the Union, whatever it took. He needed that sweet Southern tariff revenue to fund his big government plans. Which leads us to the most astonishing fact of all. The South wanted nothing to do with the Corwin Amendment. Not one of those three ratifying states was in the South.

Why? If the South was so concerned about the Northern threat to Southern slavery, why didn't the South pounce on the Corwin Amendment? With plenty of Northern support already in place, the seceding states could easily have all signed on and pushed a few other states to join in the effort. All their slavery dreams would have come true. I don't know the answer to that. Maybe because they didn't trust the North to actually live up to it, any more than Yankees had lived up to their other constitutional obligations or the Fugitive Slave Law.

Or maybe it's because they realized that slavery was coming to an end one way or another. They didn't want slavery forever. They just didn't want the North dictating the terms and timetable. They just wanted to be left alone to figure it out on their own terms. One important bit of evidence in support of that theory is the fact that, while the Confederacy made slavery legal in each of its states, it was illegal to engage in the international slave trade. The international slave trade had been illegal in the Union for many years, but that hadn't stopped Yankees from participating in it in defiance of US and international law. They continued in the slave trade right up to the start of the Civil War and rarely (very rarely) ever were punished. The profits were enormous. In fact, much of the old money wealth now in the Northeast derived originally from the international slave trade.

Jefferson Davis vetoed a bill that made the international slave trade illegal in the Confederacy. Not because he was in favor of the slave trade, but because he felt the bill wasn't strong enough to effectively prevent it. Too many possible loopholes. So he asked Congress to try again.

If the South had been thinking of perpetual slavery without end, they surely would have enthusiastically embraced the slave trade industry and peripheral enterprises. And they would have jumped all over the Corwin Amendment. They weren't planning on endless slavery. They simply wanted to end it in their own way and their own time. They may not have seen Lincoln himself as a threat to that goal, but they saw the Republican Party as a threat. Not while Lincoln was in the oval office, probably, but what about after that? They were certain about one thing. Whoever replaced Lincoln would not be sympathetic to the South, and many in the Republican Party did want to end Southern slavery as soon as possible.

Frankly, I was surprised and perplexed when I began reading the secession documents. Honestly, I was also disappointed in the South. Their thinking just didn't seem to make sense. So I had to try to make sense of it. I bought yet another Civil War book, and this author was also perplexed. He tried to answer the question of why those Southern states had been so concerned about slavery at a time when (from a modern perspective) slavery had never been more secure. He offered the theory that the secession documents were just propaganda. At first that seemed to make some sense. Southern leaders knew the time had come for secession, and they understood the real reasons, like tariff revenue. But they had to get the public on board with the idea of secession somehow. If they started talking about tariffs, Southern eyes would quickly glaze over, Southern minds would drift, and there would be no sale for secession. So, instead, they framed their argument in terms of slavery, which every person in the South understood very well. Few of them owned any slaves at all, and even fewer owned any significant number. Still, they strongly believed in their right to practice slavery. It was a right built right into the Constitution, and without that, those Southern states would never have become part of the Union in the first place. In other words, Southern leaders felt they had to use a bit of propaganda to sell secession to Southerners. Heck, almost everything Lincoln said was pure propaganda, so why shouldn't the South use it too?

But, having studied those documents, I reject that theory. I think those Southern leaders were absolutely sincere in what they said, and what they clearly said, in unambiguous terms, is that they were seceding because of the slavery issue. Not every Southern leader agreed with that, and it wasn't the only reason, but it was the primary cause. When I try to forget about all I have learned about the war and its aftermath, and try to see things from the perspective of those men living in that moment in that place, I can begin to understand where they were coming from. I think they had good reason to secede, and they had every right to do so. Even though there was no immediate threat to slavery, they were taking a longer view of the situation, and they did not like what they saw. They saw a hostile North and a federal government that was no longer willing to honor

its constitutional agreements. The South ratified the Constitution because it guaranteed their property rights as slaveholders. By 1860, the political environment was radically different than it had been in the late 1770s. Given the 1860 environment, they never would have ratified the Constitution. They tried to make it work, but it failed. Their only viable choice was to leave the Union. They had every right to do so, and no one had argued that point more passionately and convincingly than Abraham Lincoln. He even said so once again in his First Inaugural. He knew very well that the South had a right to secede. He just decided to stop them from exercising it, using military force, because he had a lot of big government plans, and he needed Southern tariff revenue to achieve his big-government goals.

England was bewildered by Lincoln's war. America had established itself on the principle that all men have the right to determine their own style of government, and if the current government isn't meeting citizens' expectations, they have the right to break away from that government and establish a new one more to their liking. Yet Lincoln was denying the South the exercise of that very same right. That made no sense to Europeans, especially Brits. They had observed how much Americans delighted in rebellions for almost any cause, anywhere in the world, throughout the 19th century. For example, Louis Kossuth had led in Hungary's secession struggle against Russia. That effort had failed, as most secessions do. But when Kossuth visited the US, New York treated him like royalty. Daniel Webster opined in Boston that Russia had violated civilized law by crushing the rebellion.

Furthermore, Massachusetts had threatened secession four different times. The first time was about the adjustment of state debts; the second was about Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase; third, the War of 1812; fourth, the annexation of Texas. Other threats of secession came from the North over the Fugitive Slave Act, the whiskey tax, and the Mexican War. Nobody ever challenged those states' right to secede. Now, however, the North was reversing course. It seems rebellions were wonderful as long as they weren't directed at the Union. Suddenly the North considered rebellion treason. In their supreme Yankee arrogance, they figured it didn't need to make sense, it didn't need to be consistent, and it didn't need to be right or fair. They didn't want Southern secession, and they had the military muscle to force their will on the South. That was all the justification they needed. All that mattered was what they wanted and what they could get by force.

England was probably inclined to join the South for that reason and for its own economic purposes. But the South made that impossible. Whatever their reasoning, however sound their judgment may have been in choosing secession, they made what is probably their biggest mistake when they wrote those secession documents. By making them all about slavery, European nations couldn't afford to be seen as supporting slavery in a time when emancipation of slaves was all the rage all over the world. With England and possibly other Europeans on their side, the War for Southern Independence would have turned out very differently. Lincoln didn't need to worry about that. The South had already guaranteed that would never happen.

What about the rest of the states that joined the Confederacy later? What do their secession documents state as the cause for secession? The word slavery is not found in any of them (although Virginia mentions slaveholding states). Virginia (April 17, 1861), Tennessee (8 June 1861), North Carolina (May 20, 1861), and Arkansas (May 6, 1861) seceded after Lincoln ordered 75,000 state militia volunteers to invade the South. Missouri seceded on October 31, 1861, and Kentucky on November 20, 1861. Only Kentucky offers any details in their document. The others simply explain why they have the right to secede and state that they have in fact seceded from the Union.