

How Green Was Their Volley?: The Cost Of The High Tariffs And Protectionism Was War

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Review

HOW GREEN WAS THEIR VOLLEY?

The cost of the high tariffs and protectionism was war

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Adams, Charles *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession*. Rowman & Littlefield, ISBN 847697223

Was the devastation of the War Between the States and the enduring sectional antipathies necessary? Were northern motives as lofty as historians have maintained?

Charles Adams is perhaps the world's leading scholar on the history of taxation, as well as author of the bestseller *For Good and Evil: The Impact of Taxes on the Course of Civilization* (second edition, 1999). Indeed, a short chapter in that book positing strong connection between taxes and the Civil War was a genesis for Adams's extended treatment of the subject in **When in the Course of Human Events**. Certainly the more- than-30-year wrangle over tariffs prior to the Civil War is well-known. John C. Calhoun believed that federal import tax laws were injurious to the South, a form of tribute exacted from her by the North. Since the South was the great exporting portion of the Union, it paid more than a proportionate share of revenue to the federal government. Moreover, disbursements for "national" improvements were decidedly lopsided in favor of the North.

By the time Abraham Lincoln was elected, with little southern support, to the presidency, demographic trends were consigning the South to permanent minority status within the Union. The Republican Party was a northern sectional party, and its platform called for high tariffs. To Adams, high tariff obligations to northern industrialists and manufacturers were explicit, and this was more important to Southerners than vague and conflicting northern opposition to slavery. With the Morrill Tariff, the Republican Congress inaugurated a policy of high protectionism in March 1861 that would last for decades. It was the highest tariff yet in American history, with average rates of 47 percent. A de

facto "war of the tariffs" began when the Confederate Constitution banned high import taxation and essentially created a free trade zone to the south. Monied interests in the North eschewed peaceful secession, since trade would shift from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans.

Adams roundly impugns the motives of the North. Lincoln's concern for enslaved blacks was more a facade than substance. Northern apologists just needed something more glamorous to fight for than taxes, and emancipation fit the bill. Southern slavery was tolerable -- southern free ports were not. Slavery was an issue that could be negotiated -- tax policy, however, was nonnegotiable. Granted, Lincoln said as much in his First Inaugural: he would not use federal power to prevent states from doing what they wished politically, only "to collect the duties and impost." Ft. Sumter was the tax collection base for Charleston Harbor. Other federal properties had been peacefully abandoned and some taken by force, but Lincoln resolved to keep the money maker. Lincoln notified the governor of South Carolina that he would bring in provisions, by force if necessary. Confederate Secretary of State Robert Toombs warned that Southerners were being baited, but they seized the fort before provisions could get there.

Despite commotion and fireworks, no one was actually hurt in the takeover of Fort Sumter. After running out of ammunition, Major Anderson surrendered the fort. The men were sent home, but Lincoln wasted no time in requesting 75,000 volunteers to put down "rebellion." The first casualties actually occurred a week later, when volunteers from Massachusetts killed 12 civilians in Baltimore. The Upper South seceded, and war was on for all practical purposes. Besides precipitating the attack on Ft. Sumter and rejecting a negotiated settlement, Lincoln seized dictatorial powers and suspended the Constitution. Unlike Franklin Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor, Lincoln circumvented a constitutional duty to call Congress in the event of an emergency, delaying the meeting for three months. In the meantime, he made decisions that arrogated to himself the power of Congress, courts, and the states. The effect was to commit the nation irrevocably to war for so-called preservation of the Union -- that is to say, preservation of the Union's revenue.

International opinion, especially in Britain, was thrown aback with amazement. The American nation had stood squarely for self-determination. Millions of people separating en masse as political states, through elective, representative, and constitutional government, did not resemble rebellion.

Rather, it was more like one nation separating from another along contiguous and discernible boundaries -- much like the American Revolution, a colonial secession from the Mother Country. The Declaration of Independence had indeed established secessionist doctrine in universalist terms of language. The words began "When in the Course of Human Events," from which Adams draws his title. John Stuart Mill was one of the few Britons to assign to slavery a causative significance for the War. He also assigned moral imperative to the victory of northern arms. Mill's views, published in Fraser's magazine, may have led to the trans-Atlantic spread of those ideas.

Adams strongly criticizes Lincoln for unilaterally suspending the writ of habeas corpus, probably the most important provision of the Bill of Rights. Lincoln closed over 300 presses and imprisoned tens of thousands of his political opponents. He imposed martial law in the North, enabling military tribunals to convict civilians and to execute them without appeal. Lincoln even tried to arrest the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Adams explains that Jefferson Davis escaped state trial and execution because, notwithstanding Reconstruction, constitutional processes reasserted themselves after the War. Attorneys general and prosecutors concluded that the legal case against secession could not be won in a bona fide court setting. War had settled the issue and trumped legal consideration or antebellum constitutionality. Finally, Adams indicts Lincoln for shifting responsibility for the War's terrible devastation and his government's tyranny from himself to God, Lincoln's fatalistic Calvinism verging on the "psychotic."

Adams's critique of Lincoln is not always objective. He can be as shrill as Clement Vallandigham, or the other western Copperheads whom he calls "peacemakers." Adams poses questions too often in a rhetorical style, then answers himself with assertions and circumstantial evidence. His commentary on the nature of warfare and the Civil War generation's love-obsession with war is bizarre; his reference to the Minnesota Sioux uprising uninformed. Adams does, however, contribute a much-needed alternative to uncritical Lincoln-adoration in history. He also successfully debunks the simplistic and mythical understanding of the War Between the States as an unqualified moral crusade to end slavery.

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