

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: The Political Crisis of the 1850s and the Irrepressible Historians

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Feature Essay

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Childers, Christopher *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: The Political Crisis of the 1850s and the Irrepressible Historians.*

The political crisis of the Union—the means by which unity and comity disintegrated and the American people descended into war with themselves—has fascinated and perplexed students of the Civil War era since the battlefields became silent. The seminal question “What caused the Civil War?” naturally leads students of the Civil War era to the political crises of the 1850s. And, in turn, historians have sought over the 150 years since the war to find ways to explain how the war came. In many respects, the historiographical battle over the politics of slavery and the coming of the war has hinged on a major theme. Just as Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas sparred over the moral implications of slavery and the sectional crisis, so too have historians fought over how morality fits into the broader narrative of antebellum politics and the coming of the Civil War.

Scholars have long debated whether the Civil War constituted an “irrepressible conflict” or a “repressible conflict” between North and South. Though North and South increasingly diverged in the 19th century, largely as a result of the decline of slavery in the North and its perpetuation and expansion in the South, describing the Civil War as an irrepressible conflict suggests the inevitability of conflict. Many historians have shown that the Civil War did not become inevitable at some point earlier than 1861; indeed, options for sectional rapprochement existed almost up to that very point. Nevertheless, scholars have found unmistakable evidence of significant differences that complicate the story of the antebellum political crisis.

Northerners and Southerners lived within different societies by virtue of slavery. Slavery evolved into more than a system of labor in the South; indeed, by the antebellum era, it had become a major component of the social, cultural, and political life of the region and its inhabitants. The same set of circumstances simply did not exist in the North, as slavery disappeared in the region over the

course of the early republic and early antebellum eras. Yet at the same time, the two sections shared much in common: a shared national government, a basic shared set of cultural values and norms (excluding slavery), and modes of commerce and communication, among others. The sameness of experience seemed to hold the sections together even as slavery served as a divisive issue in the nation.

Understanding how students of the Civil War era have grappled with these ideas and sought to explain them in a coherent narrative explain how we understand the coming of the war today. The irrepressible conflict argument originated before the war with the famous pronouncements of men like William Seward and Abraham Lincoln and reemerged with the work of historian James Ford Rhodes in his seven-volume work *The History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (1893-1906). To Rhodes and his students, slavery alone caused the breakdown of American politics in the 1850s and led to the Civil War. Rhodes emphasized the moral aspects of the slavery question as well as the institution's social and cultural impact on the divergence of North and South by the 1850s. To Rhodes and a generation of scholars trained in his work, the inevitability of the Civil War seemed remarkably apparent.

By the late 1920s, however, a new generation of scholars began to challenge the self-evident inevitability of the war and the primacy of slavery as its cause. Inspired in part by Charles and Mary Beard's economic determinism, which emphasized slavery as an economic institution and a source of labor, and by a general post-World War I disillusionment with war, politics, and ideology, a group of historians—who would become known as the revisionists—challenged the theme of an irrepressible conflict. For a generation, the revisionist historians argued that the Civil War was a repressible conflict. A paucity of pragmatic leadership had led to a crisis of governance; compromise failed as abolitionists and proslavery fanatics (and the revisionists appropriated most of their blame to the former) divided the political system and the nation over the issue of slavery. The revisionists tended to dismiss the moral strictures of the abolitionists as fanaticism, while lauding those willing to compromise on the slavery question as pragmatists.

The revisionists, most notably represented by James G. Randall and Avery Craven, responded to the moral condemnation of slavery by arguing instead that a blundering generation of leaders had failed to achieve sectional harmony, thereby leading the nation into a civil war that could have been avoided if

northerners had acted more diplomatically. The revisionists seemed incredulous that the politicians of the 1850s were so shortsighted as to brook disunion over what, for the revisionists themselves, seemed like issues ripe for compromise. They sought to explain the superheated rhetoric of the 1850s in psychological terms by blaming the disintegration of politics and compromise on a small group of fanatics who frenzied politicians and citizens in Washington and across the nation.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the revisionist school had collapsed amidst the resurgence of the civil rights movement and America's grappling with race as a paramount political issue. A new generation of historians sought to reaffirm the primacy of slavery and its moral implications for American society and politics by refuting the revisionists' claims that slavery really had not caused the war in the first place. In some respects, students of the Civil War era returned to a moral interpretation akin to Rhodes. That said, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, scholars looked for new ways to explain the erosion of the American political system and the coming of the Civil War. Some saw the fall of the Whig Party, the disintegration of the Democrats, and the creation of the Republican Party as a watershed moment of instability at a time in which Americans desperately needed stability. But whereas some historians identified slavery as the cause of the collapse, others looked to "ethnocultural" factors such as immigration, nativism, and other cultural differences in an increasingly growing and diverse nation.

Today, historians frequently borrow from these schools to explain the political crisis of the 1850s. The contours of modern interpretations of the coming of the Civil War fall within a general narrative from which historians branch out into new fields of inquiry. The North and South had bitter and profound differences by the 1850s that increasingly tested the stability and permanence of the political system. The South remained wedded to its peculiar institution, while northerners increasingly saw slavery as a moral and social evil. Both sections sought to use the political arena as a means to protect—and perpetuate—their respective agendas. Northerners increasingly saw slavery as a threat to northern free labor, especially in the emerging West, and sought to circumscribe the limits of slavery's expansion through a variety of means, most notably through the use of popular sovereignty. The popular sovereignty doctrine promised to let the people of the territories themselves decide whether to permit or prohibit slavery, thereby removing the issue from congressional purview via a democratic solution. Alas, popular sovereignty as expressed in the

Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 nearly destroyed the Democratic Party and gave rise to a new political organization dedicated to free soil, free labor, and free men: the Republican Party.

The formation of the Republican Party, coupled with a relentless demographic shift that saw much larger population growth in the North rather than the South led to a political crisis for southerners. The South had long held more than its share of power in the federal government by virtue of the three-fifths compromise, which essentially made the Senate a bulwark of southern protection. By mid-century, however, the South had become less powerful as more free states entered the Union. The conflict over slavery in the territories, and indeed the conflict over union, largely rested on the future of sectional power in the halls of government. A small but vocal group of southern nationalists, as early as the late 1840s and early 1850s, began calculating the value of the Union to southern interests.

Beyond the differences that slavery had engendered, however, a majority of northerners and southerners remained resolute in preserving the Union and believed that the political system could achieve results. After all, for several generations the great compromisers of Congress had smoothed over sectional crises one by one. Both sides blustered mightily, but in the end they brokered a compromise. In 1820, 1833, and 1850, for example, both sections overcame threats of disunion and compromised on the point of slavery. The Compromise of 1850, however, foreshadowed the increasing difficulty of compromising in a nation becoming more rigidly for and against slavery. The historian David M. Potter argued compellingly that the 1850 accord represented an "armistice" rather than a compromise, since neither side had to agree to provisions that they found unacceptable in order to seal the compromise. Instead, the compromise deferred to a later date the need to answer definitively some basic questions concerning the Union. For many, that date came four years later with the incredibly contentious (and narrow) passage of Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act in Congress. President Franklin Pierce had made support of the bill an article of faith for Democrats. The intransigence of Pierce and Douglas, coupled with the demands of southerners to repeal the Missouri Compromise line as part of the bill, led to a major split within the party itself, as disaffected "Independent Democrats" sought refuge in the nascent Republican Party. Parties and politics shifted dramatically amidst this political earthquake.

The fragility of compromise and the increasingly shrill rhetoric from ultra proslavery and antislavery forces, however, must not obscure the fact that sufficient resolve existed among northerners and southerners to preserve the Union. Compromise did not hide the differences between North and South, but the commonality of national experience and union prevailed. For a time, the nation even weathered Bleeding Kansas, Bleeding Sumner, and *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. By 1860, however, things had changed in ways ominous for the cause of union. The debacle of Kansas and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry had inflamed and scared southerners, while northerners resolutely rejected slavery and the "Slave Power." Abraham Lincoln won election to the presidency without a single southern electoral vote. The election of 1860 marked a shattering blow to the South and its political power. Many southerners feared that Lincoln's election jeopardized the South's influence within the Union, and consequently, they possessed no means to protect what they perceived as their rights.

By the secession winter of 1860-1861, many southerners stood ready to leave the Union, but many others wanted to wait and see what came of the Lincoln presidency. The presence of a significant group of conditional unionists in southern states amid increasingly louder calls for secession showed that war had not become inevitable or that conflict was irrepressible. Many northerners and southerners genuinely hoped once again for sectional rapprochement and believed that political solutions remained possible. The war came in 1861 as compromise failed and a standoff over possession of federal property came to conflict on April 12, 1861. The election of Lincoln had led seven southern state secession conventions to declare the bonds of Union dissolved. But even here, the stark divisions of sectional politics remained. Four southern states waited until Lincoln's call for troops after the shelling of Fort Sumter. Clearly, the politics of union—and indeed disunion—remained intricate and complicated even past the point at which the first shots of the Civil War were fired.

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