

Why Did Alabama Secede?

President Andrew Jackson, himself a Southerner and sympathetic to the Southern position on tariffs, was determined to enforce federal law. At a Democratic Party dinner early in 1830, the President, asked to make a toast, lifted his glass, glared across the room at South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun and said, "Our Federal Union, it must and shall be preserved." Calhoun stared back with a flinty gaze and declared, "The Union – next to our liberties, most dear."

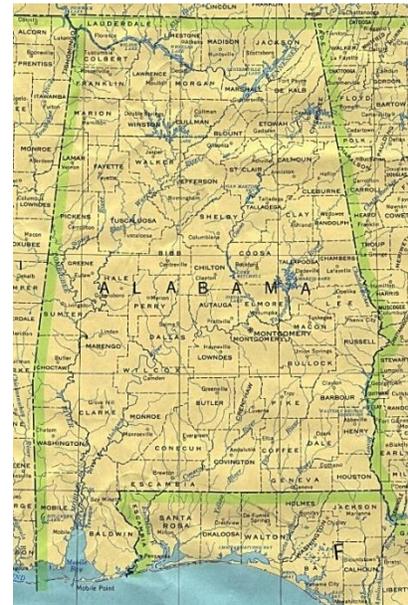
Source: lost in my notes

As March 4, 1860 dawned, the “United States of America 2.0” entered its 72nd year.¹ Still young, our nation had had a turbulent adolescence. We were a nation of dramatic political and social differences—and, unfortunately, bitter antagonisms worse than any before or since. Partisan divides between and within North and South had become so tightly wrapped that an explosion seemed inevitable. Other than zealots like John Brown and the brigands on both sides out in the Kansas Territory and Missouri, almost no one wanted violence, but the nation seemed unable to avoid it. The campaign leading up to the nation’s nineteenth presidential election lit the fuse. Ignition came with the November 6, 1860 victory of Abraham Lincoln. (The detonation, Ft. Sumter, was still to come.) Secession from the Union by several of the Southern states was triggered, and with that, the Civil War — the most convulsive event in our nation’s history before or since — was soon upon us.

As often and as deep as we go into the causes and events leading up to the Civil War, the question still haunts many of us: Why take it all the way to secession? A complicated yet common thread of grievances and aspirations ran through Southern states, yet how had relations with the North become so intolerable as to warrant such a step? It’s a deep question. We’ll take a shallow dive, using Alabama, the “Heart of Dixie”, as a center point for discussion.

The list of issues was long, with the weight of states’ rights leading. To what extent was the Union a *contract* versus an *agreement*? And if a contract, to what extent was it (un)breakable? Where did state sovereignty end and federal authority become preeminent? (A Tenth Amendment question that still vexes us.)

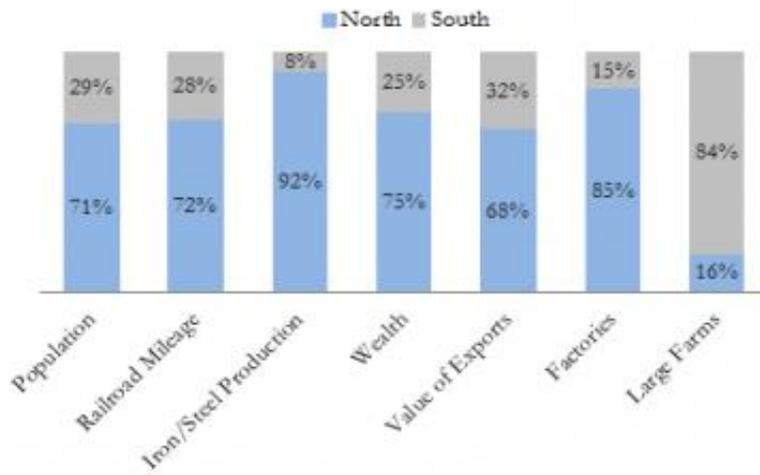
The next big one was the economic differences between North and South, which contributed to political differences characterized by contrasting values and visions for the future. Throughout the antebellum period, the North and South followed different paths, developing into two distinct regions.



(Source: <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/north-and-south>)

The North had a profound advantage in population (18 million vs 9 million), plus in the Confederacy 1 in 3 were slaves. The North was continually reinforced by immigration, much more so than the South. The slaves generally were uneducated and unmotivated to fight for the South. (When liberated during the

war, many willingly joined service with the North, in combat units and otherwise.)



The industrial North's economy revolved around manufacturing, fishing, and trading; the agrarian South's around tobacco, cotton, and slaves. Northern soil and climate favored smaller farmsteads rather than large plantations (and receptiveness to secession generally followed the latter). Because agriculture was so profitable, few

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Southerners saw a need for industrial development. Eighty percent of the labor force worked on the farm. Although two-thirds of Southerners owned no slaves at all, by 1860 the South's "peculiar institution" was inextricably tied to the region's economy and culture. In fact, there were almost as many blacks – both slaves and free – in the South as there were whites (4 million blacks and 5.5 million whites). There were no large cities aside from New Orleans, and most of the ones that did exist were located on rivers and coasts as shipping ports to send agricultural produce to European or Northern destinations. (That said, note that many Southern merchants and businessmen believed that a great growth in trade, an expansion of material prosperity, and even colonies, would follow the establishment of a Southern republic. South Carolina, for example, expected a golden era where Charleston would become a great commercial emporium, controlling the southern economy the way New York controlled the northern economy.)

Industry flourished in the North, fueled by more abundant natural resources than in the South. By 1860, one-quarter of all Northerners lived in urban areas. Between 1800 and 1860, the percentage of laborers working in agricultural pursuits had dropped drastically from 70% to only 40%. Slavery had died out, replaced in the cities and factories by immigrant labor from Europe. An overwhelming majority of immigrants, seven out of every eight, settled in the North rather than the South. Northern cities, through their ports, were the first to receive new industrial technologies. The North had a better set of railroads, a function of northern geography vs. the South's, which could get by with river transport. The North's rail system went hand-in-hand with its industrialization and urbanization. The North had a greater potential for growth.

The North had a huge psychological advantage. Beyond the morality of slavery, the Confederacy would not be a cohesive entity; created on paper, it would not be deep in the hearts and minds of its would-be citizens as would be their home states. Many were not fully invested in a long and protracted conflict.

Some wanted the right to own slaves, but could care less about states' rights and political sovereignty; others felt the opposite in that they believed in the South's right to secede, but were not sympathetic to the cause of slavery. Some felt no attachment to either slavery or secession.

Far more Northerners than Southerners belonged to the Whig/Republican political party, fast becoming the strongest national party, and they were far more likely to have careers in business, medicine, or education. In fact, an engineer was six times as likely to be from the North as from the South. Northern children were slightly more prone to attend school than Southern children. In contrast to the factory, the plantation was a central feature of Southern life.

Only one-tenth of Southerners lived in urban areas, and transportation between cities was difficult, except by water. Only 35% of the nation's train tracks were located in the South. In 1860, the South's agricultural economy was beginning to stall, while the Northern manufacturers were experiencing a boom.

A slightly smaller percentage of white Southerners were literate than their Northern counterparts, and Southern children tended to spend less time in school. These differences played out in politics. As adults, Southern men tended to belong to the Democratic political party and gravitated toward military careers as well as agriculture.

Together, these issues and circumstances over time generated two increasingly disparate cultures: North and South, each with a fractious, but distinguishable mindset. The South's "peculiar institution" permeated all aspects of the relationship. The degree to which any single issue was the ultimate cause of the war continues to be the subject of vigorous debate, but slavery was inextricably part and parcel of it. An analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this piece—perhaps in a future newsletter. In the meantime, look at the various secession declarations, particularly South Carolina's at <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/primary-sources/declaration-causes-seceding-states#compact>, and Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown's open letter to the people of Georgia giving his views regarding the need for secession, at <http://www.civilwarcauses.org/jbrown.htm>.

Tuesday, November 6, 1860, in a four-way contest, the Republican Party ticket of Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin emerged triumphant. Not everybody wanted it, but a tide was sweeping the South. The election of Lincoln served as the primary catalyst for secession.

Candidate	National Popular Vote	% of National Popular Vote	Elector Vote	% of Elector Vote	States Carried
Lincoln	1,865,593	39.79%	180 ⁽¹⁾	55.7%	18
Douglas	1,382,713	29.40%	12 ⁽²⁾	4.0%	1
Breckinridge	848,356	18.20%	72 ⁽³⁾	22.3%	11
Bell	592,906	12.61%	39 ⁽⁴⁾	12.1%	3

⁽¹⁾ Every vote of the free states except for 3 of New Jersey's 7 votes.

⁽²⁾ Only Missouri and 3 of New Jersey's 7 votes.

⁽³⁾ All the cotton states.

⁽⁴⁾ Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee

(Note sources differ on exact vote count; percentages cited here include rounding.)

In the election, fully 80% of Alabama's eligible voters participated, giving Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge a substantial victory, with 54% of the vote. John Bell, the Constitutional Union candidate who was supported by many Alabamians hostile to secession, received 31%. Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, the candidate most associated with a strongly Unionist position, polled slightly more than 15%. Republican Abraham Lincoln was not even on the ballot. Note that even though the Republicans had elected Lincoln, they controlled neither the House nor the Senate, the South had a 5-4 majority on the Supreme Court, and the federal government couldn't touch slavery in slave states except by constitutional amendment, which slave states could easily block.

Back on February 24, 1860 the state legislature had directed that, in the event of a Republican's election, a state secession convention would be called. It's preamble stated, "WHEREAS, anti-slavery agitation persistently continued in the non-slaveholding States of this Union, for more than a third of a century, marked at every stage of its progress by **contempt for the obligations of law and the sanctity of compacts**, evincing a **deadly hostility to the rights and institutions of the Southern people**, and a settled purpose to **effect their overthrow even by subversion of the Constitution**, and **at the hazard of violence and bloodshed**; and whereas, a sectional party calling itself Republican, committed alike by its own acts and antecedents, and the public avowals and **secret machinations** of its leaders to the execution of these **atrocious designs**, has acquired the ascendancy in nearly every Northern State, and hopes by success in the approaching Presidential election to **seize the Government** itself; and whereas, to permit such seizure by those whose unmistakable aim is to **pervert its whole machinery to the destruction of a portion of its members** would be an act of **suicidal folly and madness**, almost **without a parallel in history**; and whereas, the General Assembly of Alabama, representing a people loyally devoted to the Union of the Constitution, but scorning the Union which fanaticism would erect upon its ruins, deem it their **solemn duty** to provide in advance the means by which they may escape such **peril and dishonor**, and devise new securities for perpetuating the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity; therefore...[emphasis added.]" Ouch! Tensions were running high indeed. (Note that the Resolution's fifth clause required, "That copies of the foregoing Preamble and Resolutions be forwarded by the Governor as soon as possible to our Senators and Representatives in



Andrew B. Moore

Democrat

Governor of Alabama

December 1, 1857 – December 2, 1861

Congress, and to each of the Governors of our sister States of the South [emphasis added].” Regional bonding!)

True to form, Alabama Governor Andrew Barry Moore called a December 24, 1860 election for delegates to a constitutional convention. He bluntly laid out his (and thus Alabama’s) rationale for secession in a letter. (See <http://www.civilwarcauses.org/govmoore.htm>.) He makes the defense of slavery a clear objective, and negatively mentions Lincoln’s election and his suspected abolitionist leanings. He decries the long-term effort by the Black Republicans to what in today’s jargon would be the “deep state” penetration of the federal government and northern state governments to manipulate and control the South. He charges the “Black” Republicans with seeking to get decisive majorities in both chambers of Congress and on the Supreme Court “to make it harmonize with Congress and the President”. He points to the attempted nullification (via lack of enforcement) of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the Dred Scott decision (Dred Scott v. Stanford, March 6, 1857). He points to John Brown and other militant abolitionists as being their partners in crime, implying that their violence in the name of abolition is acceptable. The outcome of abolition—the “state of society that must exist in the Southern States, with four millions of free negroes and their increase, turned loose upon them—I will not discuss; it is too horrible to contemplate.”

And then, the decision: “I know that the answer that I shall give to these questions may subject me to criticism by those who do not view these matters as I do; but feeling conscious of the correctness of my conclusions and the purity of my motives, I will not shrink from responsibilities in the emergency which presents itself. It would be criminal ‘in those entrusted with State sovereignty’ not to speak out and warn the people of the encroachments that have been made, and are about to be made upon them, with the consequences that must follow.

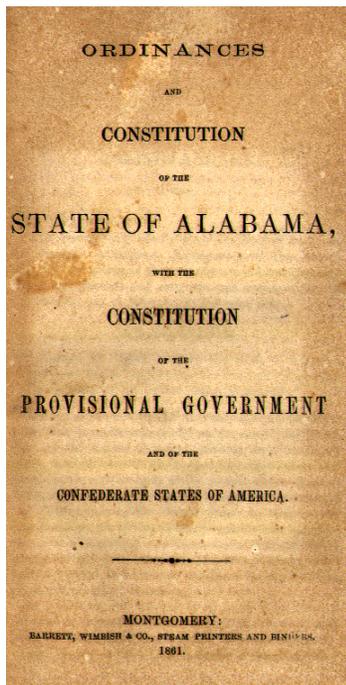
“In full view, and, I trust, a just appreciation of all my obligations and responsibilities, officially and personally, to my God, my State, and the Federal Government, I solemnly declare it to be my opinion, that the only hope of future security, for Alabama and the other slaveholding, States, is secession from the Union... I deplore the necessity for coming to such a conclusion. It has been forced upon me, and those who agree with me, by a wicked and perverse party, fatally bent upon the destruction of an institution vital to the Southern States—a party whose constitutional rights we have never disturbed, and who should be our friends yet they hate us without a cause.” And there you have it.

He goes on to argue that the Union is a compact, one that can be annulled if the states are not satisfied with what they receive in return from other states and/or from the federal government; that secession is neither treason nor an insurrection or an invasion, and thus the federal government has no right to use military force to compel states to remain in the Union.

On January 4, a full week before Alabama secedes, Governor Moore ordered the seizure of federal military installations within the state. By the end of the next day Alabama troops controlled Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan in Mobile Bay, and the US Arsenal at Mount Vernon.

Assembling on January 7, 1861 the delegates four days later voted to declare Alabama's immediate independence from the United States. Every state in the Confederacy issued an "Article of Secession" declaring their break from the Union. Alabama's *Ordinance of Secession* served that purpose, but it didn't lay out the reasons for secession so much as it described the state constitution and legal code changes necessary to accomplish secession – to transition from a state in the Union to a sovereign state, and then on to a state in the Confederacy. (See <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/timeline/1861/const.html>.)

The Ordinance was "To dissolve the Union between the State of Alabama and other States united under the compact styled 'The Constitution of the United States of America'." Note the use of "compact" to describe the Constitution. In legalese, a compact is defined as an agreement among states or between



nations on matters in which they have common concern. The implication clearly is that when such common concerns as those states have are outweighed by disagreements, the compact has lost its purpose—its meaning.

The Ordinance continued, "Whereas, the election of Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin to the offices of President and Vice-President of the United States of America by a sectional party **avowedly hostile** to the domestic institutions and to the peace and security of the people of the State of Alabama, preceded by **many and dangerous infractions** of the Constitution of the United States by many of the States and people of the Northern section, is a political wrong of so **insulting and menacing** a character as to **justify the people of the State of Alabama** in the adoption of prompt and decided measures **for their future peace and security**; Therefore, Be it declared and ordained by the people of the State of Alabama in convention assembled, That the State of Alabama now withdraws, and is hereby withdrawn, from the Union known as 'the

United States of America,' and henceforth ceases to be one of said United States, and is, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and independent State. [Emphasis added.]" More powerful words, and not just barroom talk; these were official proclamations.

And with the adoption of this Ordinance by a vote of 61-39, Alabama became the fourth state to secede from the Union. It was closer than it appears from the vote, but feelings were mixed as can be gleaned from the map below. Ironically, in Alabama the split essentially was between the northern and southern counties.



Was it legal under the Constitution to secede? Was it necessary for the South to secede? Arguably, no. It would exacerbate its problems, not solve them. And certainly, with the war many would come to conclude that the cure was worse than the ill.

Geographically, the South had an advantage. Believing firmly in the sovereignty of the State, there was never an idea among the masses of the people of the South, as well as to many in the North, that secession would *ipso facto* entail war. The South intended no aggression into the North; many in the North were quite willing to let them secede. If it came to a fight, the South would be fighting defensively for its independence. On the other hand, some in the North, particularly Abraham Lincoln, understood that secession posed an existential threat to the Union. In that sense, the South needed only to survive; the North needed complete victory. To that end, attrition would work in the Union's favor. Moreover, the North was able to convert its economic strength into a military machine much more quickly than the South.

So, why secede? There are many details not covered here: tariffs (with South Carolina's attempted nullification) and other federal economic measures "imposed" on the South; and a widespread fear among slaveowners of more slave revolts, with Southern slaves being aided and agitated by anti-slavery advocates such as the fiery William Lloyd Garrison (who, with proteges such as Wendell Phillips, known as abolition's Golden Trumpet, espoused disunion) and the militant John Brown (whose active raiding "proved" the reasonableness of fear of slave uprisings in Southern eyes), and public platforms in the

North given to former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriett Taubman. There were attempts at limiting the spread of slavery, such as the Wilmot Proviso of 1846. Note that the importation of slaves had been declared illegal in the US in 1807, but domestic slave trade was unaffected. Most of the political uproar over slavery after the trans-Atlantic prohibition revolved around its expansion into US territories and its legalization in new states admitted to the Union. There were many attempts at compromise. For example, the Missouri Compromise of 1820 (abrogated by the Dred Scott decision on March 6, 1857), the compromise of 1850 (which threw Congress into the 8-month Great Debate, only to be overtaken by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854), and the abortive Crittenden Compromise introduced in the US Senate on December 18, 1860. None proved decisive.

Agreement proved ever so elusive. Many in the South felt the Republican Party was planning to wage a war against slavery upon taking office in March 1861. While fanciful to some, there were misguided political beliefs in the North that made future sectional unity impossible. Suffice it here to say that there had evolved an irrevocable erosion of Southern trust in the national levers of power, manifested by sectionalism-cum-tribalism, by fatigue and frustration, and by fear and apprehension-based passions run wild. The South lost faith in the Union and gave up on it. It cannot be over emphasized that the adherents of secession in the South believed they were upholding the spirit and the letter of the Constitution. That is powerful. One can agree or disagree with that view, but many, in fact, did believe this.

Interestingly, both sides believed in the same core values — liberty, the Constitution, unalienable rights. They just believed in them in different ways — so differently that the wings lost trust in each other. Sectional differences had been the grist for national politics since the 1820s, with slavery (it being chattel and perpetual) the overarching backdrop of political discourse, policy, and decision-making the whole time. When the Republican Lincoln-Hamlin ticket won the 1860 presidential election, negotiations and attempted compromise limped along but, despite substantive results in the border states, in the Deep South the situation seemed futile—all hope of resolution became lost. Game on.

...[T]he time for compromise is past, and we are now determined to maintain our position and make all who oppose us smell Southern powder [and] feel Southern steel... We ask nothing, want nothing, will have no complications... No compromise, no reconstruction can now be entertained.

*Jefferson Davis, Provisional President, CSA
Montgomery, Alabama, February 17, 1861*



Many thanks to Jeff Ewing and Arley McCormick for their valuable editorial support. —Emil

Notes —

¹ 71 years earlier, on March 4, 1789 the government under the new constitution, the “United States of America 2.0”, became operational. Inauguration of its first president, George Washington, occurred on April 30 of that year.