

The Legacy of the American Civil War:
Seminal Event in American History or Seminal Failure?

By

JD Mason

"Rulers, Statesmen, Nations, are wont to be emphatically commended to the teaching which experience offers in history. But what experience and history teach is this - that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone."

G. W. F. Hegel

The American Civil War - also sometimes known as the Second American Revolution - is considered by many historians as being the seminal event in American history, perhaps second only to the First American Revolution. For a number of reasons, this statement can be thought of as being true. But, it failed to solve the problems that caused it in the first place. In fact, the final outcome of the conflict, while serving to seemingly forever remove the possibility of secession and destroying the indefensible institution of slavery, failed to secure the peace. The South, now humbled in defeat, was forced to face the further humiliation of a set of Reconstruction policies designed not to bring the country together again, but rather to punish them for their audacity. This was a failure of government; and it's one that still has not been adequately addressed.

In spite of what the "Lost Cause" adherents continue to try and tell us, the key issue that led to the Civil War, and indeed to our continuing struggles in that area, was slavery - more importantly, the struggle to support the idea that "all men are created equal." The framers of the Constitution struggled with the issue of slavery. Interestingly, the document itself never explicitly uses the word "slave" or "slavery," but it did contain provisions that protected the institution at the insistence of the Southern delegates. At the time of the convention, there were fifteen states in the confederation, broken along the lines of slavery like this:

Free States: Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont



States and Territories of the United States of America in Central North America - July 13, 1787, to April 2, 1790

Slave States: Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia

Dealing with the problem of representation was one of the first issues the framers had to grapple with. Ultimately, they proposed The Great (Connecticut) Compromise, which established a bicameral legislature with one house (the

Senate) having equal representation for each state and the other house (the House of Representatives) having representation based on population. This eased, but did not allay Southern concerns, so it was followed by the Three-Fifths Compromise stipulating that for purposes of representation and taxation, enslaved people would be counted as three-fifths of a person, granting Southern states disproportionate power.

This search for power would only be attainable so long as the Southern states could maintain their parity in the Congress. And as the country expanded westward, gathering large swaths of new land through the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican War, slavery too would have to be expanded. And so, the first half of the 19th Century was marked by compromise, never actually dealing with the problem, just kicking it down the road and hoping that it would somehow die of its own accord. And it was that continued legislative bumbling that coalesced all the other contributing factors into a situation where one section of the country came to believe that secession was the only cure.

In addition to that ineffective governance, which, by the way, continued after the war, through Reconstruction, and even until the present day allowing the problems leading to secession to grow and prosper, several other things happened that destroyed any hope of an effective solution ever being reached: Manifest Destiny, the Industrial Revolution arriving in New England, and the Second Great Awakening.

The term Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century belief that the United States was destined by God to expand westward across North America, was coined by John L.

O'Sullivan, a Democratic Review editor, in 1845, advocating for the annexation of Texas. At its core, it proffered that the growing United States had a divinely ordained right and duty to expand its territory and spread its values (democracy, Protestantism, and a belief in progress) across the continent, disregarding any other cultures, religions, or people who might get in the way. Probably the three greatest examples of Manifest Destiny in action were the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the war with Mexico from 1846-1848, and the Indian Removal Act, first proposed by Andrew Jackson, and later expanded in an 1825 address to Congress by President James Monroe, who said:

The removal of the tribes from the territory which they now inhabit . . . would not only shield them from impending ruin, but promote their welfare and happiness. Experience has clearly demonstrated that in their present state it is impossible to incorporate them in such masses, in any form whatever, into our system. It has also been demonstrated with equal certainty that without a timely anticipation of a provision against the dangers to which they are exposed under causes which it will be difficult, if not impossible to control, their degradation and extermination will be inevitable.

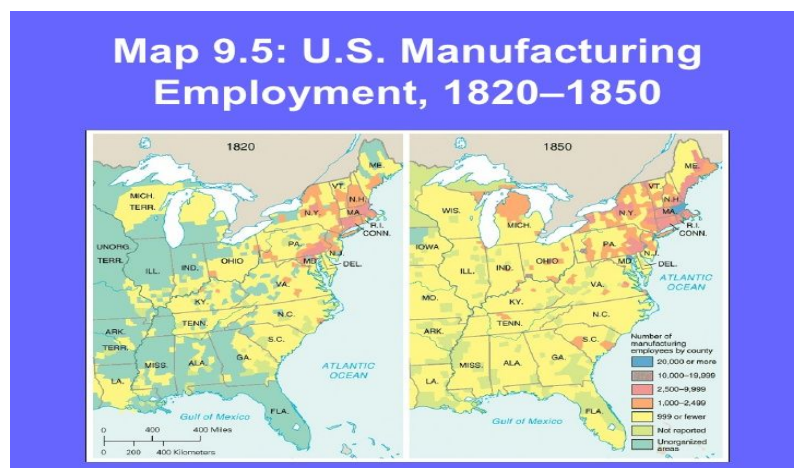
In his book *America Aflame*, David Goldfield devotes multiple chapters and references explaining how this move westward helped Americans absolve themselves of the issues imposed by slavery at home. The West, they came to believe, was a barbaric land that could only receive salvation through the guiding hand of the world's true people's democracy led by the word of God. In actuality, of course, it only exacerbated the very issues they tried to ignore.

So, in essence, Manifest Destiny only provided further fuel to the expansion of slavery, eroding the center of American politics. Goldfield says that "America went to bed one night a moderate, accommodating nation and woke up the following morning ready for Armageddon." All of the Congressional compromises for the next thirty (or more) years only made matters worse.

The Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain in the mid-18th century, and then spread to the United States. Its start in this country is often marked by the opening of the first water-powered, roller-spinning textile mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1793. As it grew, roughly from 1815-1860, it led to significant economic and social changes that resulted in the North becoming increasingly industrialized, with a growing manufacturing sector, a free labor system (though with its own exploitation), and a more diverse economy, while the South remained largely agrarian, dependent on cotton production and slave labor, leading to a more stratified society with a large planter elite and a large enslaved population. This bevy of new technological advancements, including interchangeable parts which made manufacturing more

efficient and led to the mass production of goods, and New Machines like the power loom and the sewing machine, revolutionized industries and increased productivity, and advancements in transportation, like canals and railroads, facilitating the movement of goods and people, and further connecting the economy.

Here's a chart depicting how U.S. Manufacturing Employment was distributed during the period from 1820 - 1850. Note that at the beginning of American industrialization, manufacturing and the employment it entails were virtually non-existent in those states that would shortly comprise the Confederacy. By 1850, virtually the entire Southern region was beginning to industrialize, but even so, still lagged greatly behind their Northern counterparts.



Given this discrepancy, how did it translate to actual production? Here's a chart showing the comparative resources of the Union and Confederate states in 1861. The differences are huge everywhere except two cases - free men under arms and cotton

Comparative resources: Union and Confederate states, 1861



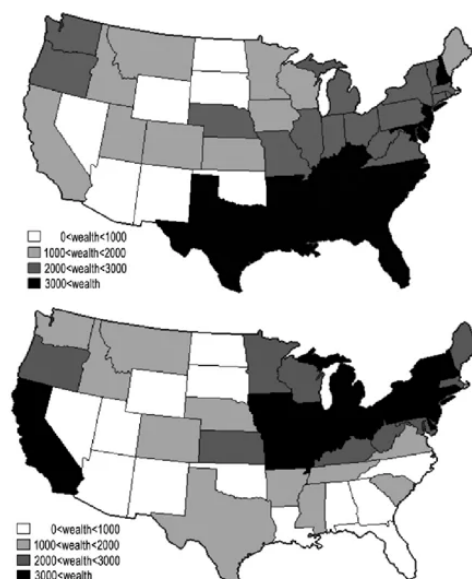
production. By all appearances, the two regions had completely diverged technologically.

And then there were the inequalities in wealth distribution.

The Civil War has often been characterized as being “a rich man’s war but a poor man’s fight.” So how was wealth gained in the two regions at the onset of that struggle? Basically, in the South, it came on the backs of enslaved people as shown here:

The Composition of Wealth in 5 Southern States		
Asset	Value in \$ Millions	% of Total Wealth
Slaves	1589	45.8
Farmlands and Buildings	868	25.0
Farm Animals	172	5.0
Farm Implements	48	1.4
Manufacturing Capital	38	1.1
Other Real Estate	364	10.5
Other Assets	393	11.2
Total:	3472	100.00

And here, depicting the centralization of wealth in 1860 (top), and 1870 (bottom):



And it's here - in the desire for wealth and power - the crux of our national schism began. Inequality had been rising since the start of the century and was high everywhere by 1860, but the southern slave economy had the most unequal distribution of wealth (Lindert and Williamson, 2016). The Gini coefficient, a statistical measure of income inequality, or how unequally wealth or income is distributed in a population (this is calculated using white male heads of household in each region) on total property wealth was 0.82 in the south prior to the war compared to 0.75 in the north. Roughly half of Southern wealth was in the form of enslaved persons, yet ownership of slaves was itself deeply unequal. Soltow (1975) found that only 21 percent of white Southerners owned slaves while about 0.5 percent owned more than 50 slaves. The war and slave emancipation of course dramatically impacted the southern economy – median wealth in our sample in 1870 was only about three-quarters of its 1860 level.

The key takeaway here is that nearly 80% of Southern wealth was tied up in agriculture, and those slaveowners fought to keep it that way. Here's an interesting thought about that "peculiar" institution: Slaveholders, though touting states' rights as their all important mantra, warmly embraced the proslavery clout of the federal government when its use was necessary. "Between the slave power and states' rights there was no necessary connection," Henry Adams argued in 1882. "Whenever a question arose of extending or protecting slavery, the slave-holders became friends of centralized power and used that dangerous weapon with a kind of frenzy."

So, to summarize, the prosperity and technology introduced by the Industrial Revolution through the 1840's and 50's coupled with the expansion of a continental empire had concealed troubling fissures in American society, substantially changing the American landscape. One section of the country was charging ahead into the future, increasing manufacturing capability and market availability while the other eschewed technology for the immense wealth that came in owning slaves to produce "King Cotton." These opposing views dominated the political discourse.

Regardless of where one lived, industrialization had a tremendous effect on both sides; sadly, that effect was mostly positive for one and negative for the other. For the country as a whole, the war was definitely a seminal event. But because both sides did not and perhaps could not share in its benefits, Southerners took on the personas of "little brothers" who resented what northern aggression had done to their culture and to their lives. In that regard, the war's legacy was a failure.

Industrialization was the economic tool that began to split the country, but it still had a chance to survive. Until, that is, the culture wars led by the Christian Nationalists began to attack morality in the form of the Second Great Awakening.

The Second Great Awakening was a Protestant religious revival during the late 18th to early 19th centuries in the United States leading to a period of antebellum social reform and an emphasis on salvation by institutions. Efforts to apply Christian teaching to the resolution of social problems presaged the Protestant social movement that aimed to apply Christian ethics to social problems, especially those such as economic inequality, poverty, racial tensions along with many others prevalent in the late 19th century. Converts were taught that to achieve salvation they needed not just to repent personal sin but also work for the moral perfection of society, which meant eradicating sin in all its forms. These evangelical converts would become leading figures in a variety of 19th century reform movements.

The consensus among historians is that the common understanding among participants of reform was that it was part of God's plan. To implement that plan, local churches sought to purify the world through the individuals to whom they could bring salvation, and through changes in the law and the creation of institutions. Interest in transforming the world was applied to mainstream political action, as temperance activists, antislavery advocates, and proponents of other variations of reform sought to implement their beliefs into national politics. While Protestant religion had previously played an important role on the American political scene, the Second Great Awakening strengthened the role it would play. And that role was division.

Arising from the turmoil came a new political party, one that would once and for all “erase any line between religion and politics. (Goldfield, p. 125.)” Prior to the 1850’s, America had two major political parties, the Whigs and the Democrats. The Great Compromise of 1850 (along with the deaths in office of both of their Presidents) was immediately and wildly unpopular with both Northern and Southern Whigs, who each had their own grievances. Then, 1854 with the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, anti-slavery Whigs, deciding that their party wasn’t sufficiently committed to halting the spread of slavery, splintered off and formed the Republican party along with anti-slavery Democrats.

Another effect was that other Whigs began getting swept up in anti-immigrant, nativist movements like the Know Nothings, a secret society that grew to become a political force in the 1850s. Supporters of the Know Nothing movement believed that

an alleged “Romanist” conspiracy to subvert civil and religious liberty in the United States was being hatched by Catholics . Therefore, they sought to politically organize native-born Protestants in defense of their traditional religious and political values. This was a political philosophy that proponents of the Great Awakening could use.

In the end, the Know-Nothings were destroyed by the same problem that ended the Whig party: clashes over race. Southern members were pushing the party to support slavery. This caused Abraham Lincoln to write:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that ‘all men are created equal.’... When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equals, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.’ When it comes to that I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

Northern Know-Nothings would have nothing to do with slavery. At the party’s national convention, a debate on the issue caused members to storm out. It ended the convention and, in effect, the party.

With the death of these two parties, The Republican Party emerged in the mid-19th century as a response to the growing tensions surrounding slavery and the political fragmentation of existing parties. Survivors formed a coalition culminating in a meeting in Ripon, Wisconsin, in February 1854, where attendees resolved to form a new party if the Kansas-Nebraska bill passed.

The formal establishment of the Republican Party occurred on July 6, 1854, in Jackson, Michigan, where a convention adopted a platform centered around opposition to the expansion of slavery into new territories. Over the next few years, the party gained momentum by absorbing former Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats, successfully positioning itself as a major political force by the time of the 1856 presidential election. The Republican Party's growth highlighted the increasing sectional divides in American politics, setting the stage for its future prominence, particularly with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

That election was the final spark to national tensions. The “Black Republicans,” as they were called across the South, had been elected to destroy the Southern way of life through the elimination of slavery. Recriminations between those “fire-eating” Southerners and their abolitionist counterparts in the north had already gone beyond rational discussion. Making matters worse, violence as seen in Nebraska and Kansas,

and throughout the west, had become the accepted way to resolve any dispute. The spark of Republicanism lit the fuses at Fort Sumter.

And so, the war that had been almost preordained since the country's inception finally came to be. Four years nearly to the day and some 750,000 lives later, the issues were decided. Secession would no longer be allowed, the Federal Government would reign supreme, slavery would be abolished, and equal rights established. Or were they?

President Lincoln knew, with Union victory imminent, that he had to devise a plan to reunite the country based on a vision of reconstruction in which the values of the American Revolution were preserved and the cause of freedom was advanced. So, on December 8, 1863, he formally issued the Ten Percent Plan, formally known as the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction to establish a process through which postwar reconstruction could come about.

This proclamation decreed that a state in rebellion against the Federal Government could be reintegrated into the Union when 10% of the 1860 vote count from that state had taken an oath of allegiance to the U.S. and pledged to abide by Emancipation. Voters could then elect delegates to draft revised state constitutions and establish new state governments. All Southerners except for high-ranking Confederate army officers and government officials would be granted a full pardon. It also made it so the South had to provide education for formerly enslaved people, who were no longer considered private property. Lincoln guaranteed Southerners that he would protect their remaining property. By 1864, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas had established fully functioning Unionist governments. It was also intended to further reinforce his emancipation policy by insisting that the new governments abolish slavery.

Congress reacted sharply to Lincoln's plan. Most moderate Republicans in Congress supported the president's proposal for Reconstruction because they wanted to bring a swift end to the war, but other Republicans feared that the planter aristocracy would be restored and the Blacks would be forced back into slavery. Lincoln's policy was lenient because he wanted to popularize emancipation, and he feared that compelling enforcement of the proclamation could lead to the defeat of the Republican Party in the election of 1864, and that popular Democrats could overturn his entire program.

Radical Republicans opposed Lincoln's plan because they thought it too lenient toward the South. From their point of view, the South was guilty of starting the war and deserved to be punished as such. So, they intended to control the Reconstruction process, transform Southern society, disband the planter aristocracy, redistribute land, develop industry, and guarantee civil liberties for former slaves. And even though they were the minority party in Congress, they managed to sway many moderates in the postwar years and came to dominate Congress in later sessions, especially after President Lincoln's assassination.

In the summer of 1864, the Radical Republicans passed a new bill known as the Wade-Davis Bill, to oppose the plan. Wade-Davis stated that for a state to be readmitted, the majority of the state would have to take a loyalty oath, not just ten percent. Lincoln later pocket-vetoed this new bill.

While Reconstruction in its final form did do a lot of good overall, like the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, for the most part, it was a failure. For one thing, its harsh requirements did nothing to ease the fears of the newly subjugated South. For another, new President Andrew Johnson believed in states' rights and allowed many southern states to govern themselves after the Civil War—essentially putting the slave-owning Democratic Party back in control. White Southerners, many of whom were former Confederate leaders, actively resisted Reconstruction, using violence, intimidation, and political maneuvering to undermine efforts to integrate African Americans into society. Then over time, Northern support for Reconstruction waned, and political priorities shifted, leading to a decline in federal intervention in the South. And, much as had been feared, slavery in essence reappeared, couched in the legal form of sharecropping and tenant farming.

But something else had been brewing that further impacted any idea of reunification. When Confederate General John Brown Gordon, commander of the remnants of the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, gathered his troops in a square at Appomattox Court House after the surrender had been announced, he made a speech that was the beginning of the myth of The Lost Cause. In it, he told his troops that they had been surrendered only as a result of circumstances beyond their control - they may have been overwhelmed by numbers and supplies, but they were never outfought.

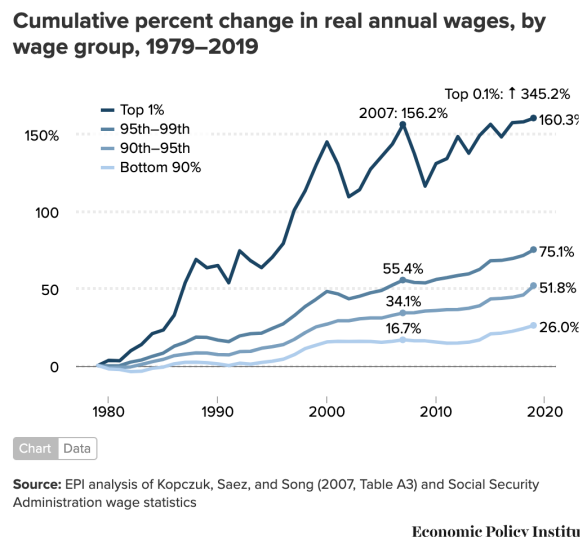
General Lee echoed these sentiments in his farewell address, otherwise known as General Order No. 9, dated 10 April 1865:

After four years of arduous service marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.

These types of comments, followed up later by generations of southerners who were still fighting the fight, did nothing to end the disharmonies between the contestants. The combination of the two, along with the fact that still today - 160 years later - the country is embroiled with the same essential problems, makes one wonder whether those 750,000 people died for nothing. And because those same problems still exist, and because our elected officials still have no idea how to resolve anything, the issues persist.

So, I offer all of this background, recognizing that it only brushes at the issues - a full accounting of which would require one and perhaps several volumes - to make the point that for all intents and purposes, all of those issues that affected and ultimately split the country in the first half of the 19th Century still exist today, albeit altered.

Industrialization is now couched in terms of capitalism and entrepreneurship, but it still serves to divide people into the wealthy and the poor. In its newsletter *Executive Paywatch*, the AFL-CIO reported that in 2023, CEOs of S&P 500 companies earned an average of \$17.7 million, while the average worker earned \$65,470, resulting in a CEO-to-worker pay ratio of 268-to-1. The Congressional Progressive Caucus Center posted the data another way:



What does this tell us? Simply put, the wealth gap evidenced in 1850 not only still exists, it has grown exponentially. Making it worse, incompetent (or totally partisan) politicians now want to all but exempt the top 1%, along with the corporations they run, from paying for their fair share of government. And just like it did in 1850, that inequality is splitting the country into haves and have-nots. A democracy without a viable and vibrant middle class cannot long exist.

Granted, constitutionally sanctioned slavery no longer exists, and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments offered great strides in support of the creed first stated in the Declaration of Independence's preamble that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights . . ."

The problem is that those sanctions no longer exist, having been systematically gutted by executive, legislative, and/or judicial fiat. Although slavery doesn't in theory exist, minimum wages have reintroduced the concept of "tenant farmers", requiring workers to work for sub-minimal wages while, as seen in the chart above, owners reap huge rewards.

And what about the suffrage rights guaranteed under the 15th Amendment? The Voting Rights Act was for all intents and purposes overturned by the Supreme Court; the proposed SAVE act stands as the first step in disenfranchising large swaths of female voters and voters of color, and unregulated money buys elections disregarding the will of the people. As those efforts move to their extremes, it is in fact the reimposition of slavery - rich oligarchs in control of the lives of others.

This last statement is especially troublesome - and actually occurring - in our current legislatures, state and federal, where our elected representatives no longer care about our will, but only about the will of those who fill their campaign war chests. The concept of Congress has changed in 160 years, yet it oddly remains the same. Then, the limiting factor was the maintenance and spread of slavery; now, it's simply the greed for power and money. In any case, much as it was in 1850, today's Congress remains ineffectual.

So, in closing, whether the legacy of our Civil War was as the seminal event in our history or the seminal failure is one not yet made fully clear. The issues have morphed, the irritants remain, and the vast majority of the country still has no voice in how she's run or the direction she takes. Perhaps these words from President Lincoln

should be engraved in the halls of power and recited every day. But until they are finally realized, the carnage of our Civil War, much like the issues that led to it, will continue to be kicked down the road.

"Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us therefore study the incidents in this as philosophy to learn wisdom from and none of them as wrongs to be avenged."

Abraham Lincoln (in the context of The American Civil War of 1861 to 1865)

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