**Confronting Slavery and Revealing the "Lost Cause"**

By **James Oliver Horton, Professor Emeritus, George Washington University**

*While slavery was not the only cause for which the South fought during the Civil War, the testimony of Confederate leaders and their supporters makes it clear that slavery was central to the motivation for secession and war.*

*"The Lash," a lithograph by Henry Louis Stephens (1863)*

*Library of Congress*

One of the most sensitive and controversial issues that any Civil War site interpreter will confront is the role of slavery in the South's decision to secede from and take up arms against the United States. Although an argument that slavery played an important role in the coming of the Civil War would raise few eyebrows among academic scholars, for public historians faced with a popular audience unfamiliar with the latest scholarship on the subject such an assertion can be very controversial. Whenever I speak to groups about the Civil War, I am reminded that slavery and the war are often separated in the public mind.  
  
As historian James McPherson explained in a recent article, it is especially difficult for southern whites "to admit - that the noble Cause for which their ancestors fought might have included the defense of slavery." Yet, the best historical scholars over the last generation or more have argued convincingly for the centrality of slavery among the causes of the Civil War. The evidence for such arguments provided in the letters, speeches, and articles written by those who established and supported the Confederacy is overwhelming and difficult to deny. While slavery was not the only cause for which the South fought during the Civil War, the testimony of Confederate leaders and their supporters makes it clear that slavery was central to the motivation for secession and war. When southern whites in the 19th century spoke of the "southern way of life," they referred to a way of life founded on white supremacy and supported by the institution of slavery.   
  
South Carolina led the way when its Charleston convention, held just before Christmas in 1860, declared that the "Union heretofore existing between the State of South Carolina and the other States of North America is dissolved ... " The reason for the drastic action, South Carolina delegates explained in their "Declaration of the Causes which Induced the Secession of South Carolina," was what they termed a broken compact between the federal government and "the slaveholding states." It was the actions of what delegates referred to as "the non-slaveholding states" who refused to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that was the specific example used as evidence for this argument. "In many of these States the fugitive [slave] is discharged from the service of labor claimed,.... [and] in the State of New York even the right of transit for a slave has been denied .... " The delegation made clear that the election of Abraham Lincoln in the fall of 1860 as "President of the United States whose opinions and purposes are hostile to Slavery" was the final straw. In the South Carolinian mind the coming of Republican political power signaled, in the words of the convention, "that a war [would] be waged against slavery until it shall cease throughout the United States."   
  
The editors at the Charleston Mercury agreed. They had anticipated the threat that a Republican victory would pose when in early November they warned South Carolinians and the entire South that "[t]he issue before the country is the extinction of slavery." "No man of common sense, who has observed the progress of events, and is not prepared to surrender the institution," they charged, "can doubt that the time for action has come-now or never." The newspaper editors, like most southerners, saw Lincoln's election as lifting abolitionists to power, and like most southerners they understood, as they plainly stated, that "[t]he existence of slavery is at stake." They called for a convention to consider secession because they saw such action as the only way to protect slavery. When the South Carolina convention did meet little more than a month later, it dealt almost entirely with issues related directly to slavery. It did not complain about tariff rates, competing economic systems or mistreatment at the hands of northern industrialists. The South was not leaving the United States because of the power of northern economic elites who in reality, as historian Bruce Levine observed, "feared alienating the slave owners more than they disliked slavery." The secession of South Carolina, approved by the convention 169 votes to none, was about the preservation of slavery.   
  
Alexander Hamilton Stephens of Georgia also understood what the South was fighting for. A decade before secession, in reaction to the debate over the Compromise of 1850, he wrote to his brother Linton citing "the great question of the permanence of slavery in the Southern States" as crucial for maintaining the union. "[T]he crisis of that question," he predicted, "is not far ahead." After the war he would become more equivocal, but in the heat of the secession debate in the spring of 1861 Stephens spoke as directly as he had in 1850. On March 21, 1861 in Savannah, Stephens, the then Vice President of the Confederacy, drew applause when he proclaimed that "our new government" was founded on slavery, "its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth, that the [N]egro is not equal to the white man; that slavery - submission to the superior race - is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."   
  
Mississippi's Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, was more cautious about declaring slavery as the pivotal issue. When he did address the issue, he generally did so within the context of constitutional guarantees of property rights. Yet, there was no doubt that the property rights he sought most to guarantee in 1861 protected slavery. He was sure that under Republican rule "property in slaves [would become] so insecure as to be comparatively worthless...." As a large slaveholder, Davis was concerned about the economics of abolition as well, but as an experienced politician he also worried that an overtly pro-slavery stand might alienate potential European allies and split the southern population. After all, by 1861 only about one-third of southern families in the 11 seceding states held slaves and the non-slaveholders always posed a potential problem for Confederate unity.  
  
A special edition of the Louisville Daily Courier was detailed and direct in its message to non-slaveholders. The abolition of slavery would raise African Americans to "the level of the white race," and the poorest whites would be closest to the former slaves in both social and physical distance. Thus, "do they wish to send their children to schools in which the [N]egro children of the vicinity are taught? Do they wish to give the [N)egro the right to appear in the witness box to testify against them?" Then the article moved to the final and most emotionally-charged question of all. Would the non-slaveholders of the South be content to "AMALGAMATE TOGETHER THE TWO RACES IN VIOLATION OF GOD'S WILL." The conclusion was inevitable the article argued; non-slaveholders had much at stake in the maintenance of slavery and everything to lose by its abolition. African-American slavery was the only thing that stood between poor whites and the bottom of southern society where they would be forced to compete with and live among black people.   
  
These arguments were extremely effective as even the poorest white southerners got the message. Their interest in slavery was far more important than simple economics. As one southern prisoner explained to his Wisconsin-born guard "you Yanks want us to marry our daughters to niggers." This fear of a loss of racial status was common. A poor white farmer from North Carolina explained that he would never stop fighting because what he considered to be an abolitionist federal government was "trying to force us to live as the colored race." Although he had grown tired of the war, a Confederate artilleryman from Louisiana agreed that he must continue to fight. An end to slavery would bring what he considered horrific consequences, for he would "never want to see the day when a [N]egro is put on an equality with a white person." Even northern soldiers understood the passion with which the Confederates fought to protect the institution of slavery. Most Confederates would have agreed with the assessment of a Union soldier in 1863, shortly after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation. "I know enough about the southern spirit," he said, "that I think they will fight for the institution of slavery even to extermination." Fears of the consequences of abolition fostered white solidarity, forming the load-bearing pillar in the foundation of Confederate nationhood.   
  
Although the defense of slavery was central to the Confederacy, the abolition of slavery was not initially the official goal of the United States or the primary concern of most of the American people. As the most respected historians of our generation have shown, Lincoln and the vast majority of Republicans sought only to limit the expansion of slavery. Most who supported this "free soil" program that would maintain the western territories for free labor, did so out of self-interest. To urban or farm workers or to northern small farmer owners, Republicans offered the possibility of cheap land devoid of competition from slave labor or even from free blacks, who faced restriction in western settlement. "Vote yourself a Farm," was the not-so-subtle Republican message to white laboring men with the understanding that the western territories, having undergone Indian removal in the 1830s and 1840s, would be racially homogeneous.   
  
Abolitionists, black and white, sincerely sought the end to slavery and accepted its geographical limitation as a step toward its inevitable demise. But although most whites in the North wanted to restrict slavery's spread, they would not have gone to war in 1861 to end it. President Lincoln understood his constituency very well and his statements on slavery were calculated to reassure white northerners as well as southern slaveholders that the U.S. government had, in his words, "no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists." Indeed, Lincoln even reluctantly agreed to accept an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would have protected slavery in those states where it existed. Ohio, Maryland, and Illinois actually ratified this measure that, ironically, would have been the 13th Amendment. Although this may have played well among northerners who were willing to concede protection to slavery so long as it remained in the South, slaveholders understood only too well it was not that simple.   
  
Since most Americans saw the West as the place that would provide the vitality of national progress, to deny slaveholders access to that territory was to deny them access to America's future. Southerners took such restrictions as a direct affront to their regional honor and a threat to their social and economic survival. Georgia secessionist Robert Toombs put it succinctly: "we must expand or perish." Lincoln did not have to explain that slavery had no place in the nation's future, the South was well aware that in order to save their institution of bondage they must leave the United States and that is precisely what their secession movement was calculated to do.   
  
Thus, while northerners claimed that they meant only to restrict slavery's expansion, southerners were convinced that to restrict slavery was to constrict its life blood. This war was not about tariffs or differences in economic systems or even about state's rights, except for the right of southern states to protect slavery. It was not willing to stand for state's rights except to preserve its institution of slavery where it existed and where it must expand. Some southerners had argued in the 1850s for the annexation of Cuba, one of only two other remaining slave societies in the western hemisphere, as one plan for slavery's expansion. Others looked to Mexico and Latin America, but always it was about saving and expanding slavery. And while the U.S. government may not have gone to war to abolish slavery in the South, it did go to war to save the union from what it increasingly came to believe was a "slave power conspiracy" to restrict citizen liberties and finally to destroy the United States. The northern determination to contain slavery in the South and to prevent its spread into the western territories was a part of the effort to preserve civil rights and free labor in the nation's future. The South was willing to destroy the union to protect slavery.   
  
Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 transformed the war into a holy crusade, but there was always disagreement among U.S. troops about outright abolition. Yet, increasingly after 1863, "pro-emancipation conviction did predominate among the leaders and fighting soldiers of the Union Army." Regardless of whether U.S. troops fought to limit or to abolish it, however, slavery was the issue that focused their fight, just as it did for the Confederacy. A half-century after serving the Confederate cause, John Singleton Mosby, legendary leader of Mosby's Rangers, offered no apologies for his southern loyalties. He was quite candid about his reason for fighting. "The South went to war on account of slavery," he said. "South Carolina went to war - as she said in her secession proclamation - because slavery w[oul]d not be secure under Lincoln." Then he added as if to dispel all doubt, "South Carolina ought to know what was the cause of her seceding."   
  
Of course, Mosby was right. South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and the other states that seceded from the United States did know the reason for their action and they stated it clearly, time and time again. They named the preservation of slavery as foremost among their motivations. When such a wide variety of southerners - from private citizens, to top governmental officials, from low ranking enlisted men to Confederate military leaders at the highest levels, from local politicians to regional newspaper editors - all agree, what more evidence do we need?  
  
This essay is taken from *The Civil War Remembered*, published by the National Park Service and Eastern National. This richly illustrated handbook is available in many national park bookstores or may be purchased online from Eastern at [**www.eparks.com/store.**](http://www.eparks.com/store/product/88361/%2AThe-Civil-War-Remembered/)

AYR QUESTIONS- Be sure to provide evidence for each answer

1.) How does the author prove that the Southern states seceded over the issue of slavery above all other reasons?

2.) Why did non-slave owning whites fight on the side of the confederacy?

3.) At the outset of the Civil War Lincoln, and most other northern politicians, were not in favor of completely and immediately abolishing slavery. What did they favor instead? Why did the South see this as such a threat?