What caused the Civil War?

A number of issues ignited the Civil War: states’ rights, the role of the federal government, the preservation of the Union, the economy; but all were inextricably bound to the institution of slavery.
The role of slavery in bringing on the Civil War has been hotly debated for decades. One important way of approaching the issue is to look at what contemporary observers had to say. In March 1861, Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederates States of America, was quoted in the Savannah Republican:

“The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution African slavery as it exists amongst us, the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the ‘rock upon which the old Union would split.’ He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact.

“Our foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.”

Savannah Republican, March 21, 1861

Today, most professional historians agree with Stephens that slavery and the status of African Americans were at the heart of the crisis that plunged the U.S. into a civil war from 1861 to 1865. That is not to say the average Confederate soldier fought to preserve slavery or the average Union soldier went to war to end slavery. Some fought on moral grounds. Some fought because they felt their way of life and prosperity were threatened. Others fought to preserve the Union. Soldiers fight for many reasons—notably to stay alive and support their comrades in arms. The North’s goal in the beginning was the preservation of the Union, not emancipation. For the 180,000 African Americans who ultimately served the U.S. in the war, however, emancipation was the primary aim.
The roots of the crisis over slavery that gripped the nation in 1860-1861 go back well before the nation’s founding. In 1619, slavery was introduced to Virginia, when a Dutch ship traded African slaves for food. Unable to find cheap labor from other sources, white settlers increasingly turned to slaves imported from Africa. By the early 1700s, in British North America, slavery generally meant African slavery. Southern plantations using slave labor produced the great export crops—tobacco, rice, forest products, and indigo—that made the American colonies prosperous. Many Northern merchants made their fortunes either in the slave trade or by exporting the products of slave labor. African slavery was central to the development of British North America. Although slavery existed in all 13 colonies at the start of the American Revolution in 1775, a number of Americans (especially those of African descent) sensed the contradiction between the Declaration of Independence’s ringing claim of human equality and the existence of slavery. Reacting to that contradiction, Northern states decided to phase out slavery following the Revolution. The future of slavery in the South was debated, and some held out the hope it would eventually disappear there as well.

*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, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.*

United States Declaration of Independence
Slavery and the Economy

All realistic hope slavery might eventually die out in the South ended when Massachusetts native Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin—a simple machine that enabled textile mills to use the type of cotton grown in most of the South. At the same time, the world demand for cotton exploded. By 1840, cotton produced in the American South earned more money than all other U.S. exports combined. Many white Southerners came to believe cotton could be grown only with slave labor. Over time, most took for granted that their prosperity, even their way of life, was inseparable from African slavery.

Slavery was not the only source of dispute. The North and South were very different in nature, and wanted different things from their government. In the North, society was fast becoming industrial. Immigrants in search of work were arriving by the thousands. In addition, women began to leave the farms seeking opportunity in the cities. Immigrants and women provided an abundant source of inexpensive labor to fuel the factories. Industrialization increased the amount of textiles produced and therefore, the demand for more slave labor. Entrepreneurs looking to develop these new industries demanded protection from the cheap European imports.
The South, on the other hand, remained a region of small towns and large plantations. The great cotton empire depended on slave labor and cheap European imports. Southerners began to fear that if the North ever gained control in Congress, it would create taxes on imports, known as tariffs, which would ruin the South.

John C. Calhoun, Vice President under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, was among the first to voice this concern. Though he opposed secession, Calhoun argued that a state could protect its interests by simply nullifying any act by the Federal government it considered unconstitutional and unfair. Southerners began to rely on the concept of states’ sovereignty as a means of self-protection.
Slavery and the Constitution

When the U.S. Constitution was written in 1787, the interests of slaveholders and those who profited from slavery could not be ignored. Although slaves could not vote, white Southerners argued slave labor contributed greatly to the nation's wealth. The Constitution, therefore, provided for counting each slave as $\frac{3}{5}$ of a person in the census for the purposes of representation in Congress and the electoral college. The clause gave the South a role in the national government far greater than representation based on its free population alone would have allowed.

Although the Constitution did not use the term “slavery,” Article IV provided for the return of escaping persons “held to service or labor” such as fugitive slaves. Article I provided that the slave trade would end 20 years after the Constitution was ratified, which was in 1808.

The Constitution left many questions about slavery unanswered, in particular, the question of slavery’s status in any new territory acquired by the U.S. The failure to deal forthrightly and comprehensively with slavery in the Constitution guaranteed future conflict over the issue and was ultimately one of the primary catalysts for war.

The war began because a compromise did not exist that could solve the difference between the free and slave states regarding the power of the national government to prohibit slavery in territories that had not yet become states.

–James McPherson, Historian

The issue was not the existence of slavery, but the extension of it.

–Dwight Pitcaithley, former Chief Historian of the National Park Service
I had a vision...I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams – and I heard a voice saying, “...such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.”

Nat Turner, enslaved man

Slavery and States’ Rights

The question of who had the power to allow or disallow slavery in the territories and the newly formed states—the federal government or the states—provoked a heated national debate that would last for decades, resulting in a number of compromises.

The proposed admission of Missouri as a slave state in 1820, led to the Missouri Compromise. Under its terms, Maine was admitted as a free state at the same time Missouri came in as a slave state, maintaining the balance between slave and free. Additionally, Congress prohibited slavery in all western territories lying above Missouri’s southern boundary.

The Missouri Compromise quieted the agitation over slavery. But, Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to a friend, said that the compromise was “like a firebell in the night.” He also foretold that the institution of slavery was like holding a “wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.” True to his prediction, the anti-slavery movement, which had been around since before the Revolutionary War, gained strength, and became more vocal and more radical by the 1830s, calling for the immediate end to slavery. One of these radical abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, declared:

Enslave the liberty of but one human being and the liberties of the world are put in peril... I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice... I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard.

The firebell in the night that Jefferson predicted went off when Nat Turner, an enslaved man in Southampton County, Virginia, believed that he was called by God in a vision to initiate a slave revolt. He hoped it would spread into a massive uprising. Starting with a few trusted fellow slaves, Turner began his rebellion on April 21, 1831. Other enslaved and free blacks joined, eventually numbering about 70 rebels. During the revolt, some 60 whites were killed. The retaliation was swift and harsh. Local militias and detachments from the American naval fleet docked in Norfolk, numbering about 3000 men, captured and executed 56 blacks. Another 100-200 blacks
The Underground Railroad was a vast network of people who helped fugitive slaves escape to the North and to Canada. It was not run by any single organization or person. Rather, it consisted of many individuals, such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth—some whites but predominantly blacks—who knew only of the local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation. Still, it effectively moved hundreds of thousands of slaves northward each year.

In 1853, a free black man, upon entering the state of Maryland, was sold into slavery and died trying to escape. In a letter to the leader of the Underground Railroad movement in Philadelphia, African American woman and Anti-Slavery Society organizer, Frances Harper wrote: Upon that grave I pledge myself to the Anti-Slavery cause.
With tensions at a fevered pitch, Harriet Beecher Stowe published her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, describing the atrocities of slave life. The book sold 300,000 copies in its first year and became the second best-selling book of the 19th century, following the Bible. The novel’s popularity roused intense new resentment in the South.

Then, in 1854, passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act invoked the concept of “popular sovereignty” which gave the people of each territory choosing to pursue statehood, the right to decide whether or not to allow slavery. Pro- and anti-slavery factions turned the Kansas Territory into a bloody battleground.

Settlers from the North were determined to make Kansas a free state. Southern settlers were equally determined to make it a slave state. Missouri’s Border Ruffians came across the border to intimidate free-soilers and raid abolitionist towns. Some Northerners shipped in boxes of rifles, known as “Beecher’s Bibles.” (Filled with antislavery fervor, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher had once said there might be situations where a gun was more useful than a Bible.) John Brown and his followers started their bloody fight against slavery, killing pro-slavery sympathizers in Kansas.

Back in Washington, D.C., tempers flared. After addressing “the crime against Kansas,” Senator Charles Sumner from Massachusetts was attacked with a cane and beaten unconscious on the Senate floor. Senator Toombs from Georgia announced he would one day auction slaves on Boston Common itself. In Alabama, Seccessionist William Lowndes Yancey argued angrily that the South would never find happiness until it left the Union and became an independent nation.
The Politics of Unrest

The Republican Party was organized as a direct response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Republicans made opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories their chief issue. Inevitably, the party aroused deep anger in the South. Attitudes in the two sections of the nation continued to harden into the late 1850s.

Then, in 1857, Dred Scott, an enslaved man who was taken by his owner, an Army surgeon, into Illinois and Wisconsin Territory (later Minnesota) which were part of the Northwest Territory in which slavery was prohibited, sued for his freedom. The U. S. Supreme Court decided that Americans of African descent—whether enslaved or free—were not U.S. citizens and did not have the right to sue. The Court also found the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, ruling that the federal government did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories.

Two years later, the powder keg ignited. John Brown, with a handful of followers, attempted to seize the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, hoping to use the weapons stored there to incite a slave insurrection in the South. He managed to capture an engine house which he held overnight. However, the next morning, a detachment of U.S. Marines, led by army Colonel Robert E. Lee overran the building. Brown was quickly tried, convicted of treason, and hanged. After this raid, the hope of a peaceful solution to the problem of slavery seemed more and more remote.

If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further... with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments—I submit; so let it be done.

John Brown, Abolitionist, at his court hearing
The question of slavery, and particularly slavery in the territories, dominated the presidential election of 1860. The recently formed Republican Party emerged as the advocate for abolishing slavery in the territories. Abraham Lincoln was the party candidate. The Democratic Party, which had dominated politics in the 1850s, split along sectional lines, with Northern Democrats nominating Stephen A. Douglas, and adopting a platform of extending popular sovereignty to the territories. The Southern Democrats nominated John C. Breckenridge, and their platform advocated the protection of slavery where it existed and in the territories. Not happy with any of the above options, another party, the Constitutional Union Party, made up of remnants of the Whig and other earlier parties, nominated John Bell as its candidate. Its platform advocated compromise on the issue to slavery to save the Union and the Constitution.

Though he didn’t receive a majority of the popular vote, Lincoln gained a solid majority in the Electoral College. He won the election by carrying most Northern states and the western states of California and Oregon, while failing to receive a single electoral vote in the Deep South, where in ten states he was not on the ballot.

Spurred by South Carolina, the states of the Deep South concluded a limitation on slavery in the territories was the first step toward a total abolition of its “peculiar institution.” Expecting the worst, the South Carolina legislature remained in session waiting for the election to be held. Immediately upon seeing the results, representatives called for a special state convention in December, which voted unanimously for the state to secede from the Union. One by one, six other states—Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas—also left the Union, calling their new country the Confederate States of America and electing Jefferson Davis as its president.

Following Lincoln’s election, the State of South Carolina votes to secede from the Union.
Lincoln hoped desperately to achieve a peaceful solution, but when he decided to resupply the U.S. army troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April of 1861, Confederate forces fired on the fort. Lincoln then asked for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. This prompted Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas to join the Confederacy. Civil war had come.

There were many differences of opinion between the North and the South in 19th-century America. Differences over slavery were the only ones that could not be settled by peaceful means. Evidence from that time shows the secession of seven Deep South states was caused primarily by concerns over the future of slavery. When Mississippi seceded, she asserted that:

Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery . . . Utter subjugation awaits us in the Union, if we should consent longer to remain in it. It is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. We must either submit to degradation, and to the loss of property worth four billions of money [the estimated total market value of slaves], or we must secede from the Union framed by our fathers, to secure this as well as every other species of property.
Fighting for Freedom

Though emancipation was the goal of the war for African Americans, President Lincoln insisted the conflict was not about slavery or civil rights, but an effort to preserve the Union. Therefore, at first, he would not permit African American volunteers from the North to enlist.

Developing a policy for dealing with escaping slaves was even more confusing. At first, some were put to work for the Union forces, while others were returned to their owners. Then, in August of 1861, fugitive slaves were declared to be “contraband of war” if their labor had been used to aid the Confederacy. If found to be contraband, the former slaves became confiscated property of the Union, but in essence, they were really freed.

Slaves from the South fled to Union lines and some took refuge in newly forming contraband camps. In some of these camps, formerly enslaved people gained their first taste of freedom and an opportunity for education. Some built their own communities with telling names such as Promiseland and Fredonia.

By 1862, Lincoln was considering emancipating slaves under Confederate control as a military strategy to win the war. The South had been using slaves to aid the war effort. Black men and women had been forced to build fortifications, work as blacksmiths, nurses, and laundresses, and to work in factories and armories. Meanwhile, the North was refusing to accept the services of black volunteers and freed slaves—the people who most wanted to defeat the slaveholders. However, after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union army accepted black soldiers into its ranks.

President Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves under Confederate control.

Fire must be met with water, darkness with light, and war for the destruction of liberty, must be met with war for the destruction of slavery. The simple way, then, to put an end to the savage and desolating war now waged by slaveholders, is to strike down slavery itself, the primal cause of that war.”

Frederick Douglass, Abolitionist
African American men rushed to enlist. Contraband and Colored Troops served in all-black units commanded by white officers. Though they faced segregation and discrimination, they fought with valor, their contributions helping turn the tide of battles. By the end of the war, roughly 180,000 troops were men of color, some earning the highest military honors.

When the charge was started, our Color guard was full: two sergeants and ten corporals. Only one of the twelve came off that field on his own feet. Most of them are there still...It was a deadly hailstorm of bullets sweeping men down as hail-stones sweep the leaves from trees...

Sgt. Major Christian Fleetwood, USCT, Medal of Honor Recipient

At the Battle of Chaffin’s Farm, with most of the officers dead or wounded, the sergeants of the 4th United States Colored Troops (USCT) assumed leadership.

U.S. Colored Troops, 4th Massachusetts, Reenactors

Library of Congress
Historians have said the Civil War was the unfinished business of the Revolution and the Constitution, and yet today that business is still incomplete. There are still obstacles to overcome before Americans of every creed, color, and gender are truly equal. If the Civil War was the defining moment in the history of the nation 150 years ago, this then, is the defining task of the current generation.

To what end did 620,000 soldiers sacrifice their lives?

In the end, the Civil War determined what type of a country we would be—united; and what type of a people we would be—free.

Unfinished Business

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