

The Absurdity of Slavery as the Cause of the War Between the States

By Gene Kizer, Jr.

Slavery as the cause of the American War Between the States is an absurdity of biblical proportions. The great historian Shelby Foote was right when he said that slavery "was not the true cause of the war. It was an element in the cause of the war, but it was not what the war was really fought about. The war was really fought about whether the federal government should dominate state government. In other words, it was basically states' rights...."

I have written a book entitled *Slavery Was Not the Cause of the War Between the States, The Irrefutable Argument* in which the argument is laid out in detail with 218 footnotes and over 200 sources in the bibliography. In this brief article, I would like to touch on the main reasons why slavery was not the cause of the War.

The primary cause of the War Between the States was the impending economic annihilation of the North when the first seven Southern states seceded. The rapidly deteriorating Northern economy created a backdrop of extreme fear, unrest

and anger in the North, and it drove all actions of Lincoln and Northern leaders in the winter and spring of 1861. A solution had to be found quickly or a major catastrophe was going to happen in the North and lead to, at worst, anarchy - and, at best, a greatly diminished economic position in the world. Just the talk of secession caused horror and panic to many such as the *Daily Chicago Times*, which wrote on December 10, 1860, a week before South Carolina's secession convention was to convene:

In one single blow our foreign

commerce must be reduced to less than one-half what it now is. Our coastwide trade would pass into other hands. One-half of our shipping would lie idle at our wharves. We should lose our trade with the South, with all its IMMENSE PROFITS. Our manufactories would be in utter ruins. Let the South adopt the free-trade system, or that of a tariff for revenue, and these results would likely follow. If protection be wholly withdrawn from our labor, it could not compete, with all the prejudices against it, with the labor of Europe. We should be driven from the market, and

millions of our people would be compelled to go out of employment.⁵ (Emphasis added.)

Northerners quickly discovered that their enormous wealth and power, as well as most of their employment, were dependent on the South - on manufacturing for their captive Southern market and shipping Southern cotton. Cotton alone was 60 percent of US exports in 1860. Southerners were growing 66 percent of the world's cotton, but Northerners shipped that cotton and "handled virtually everything else" making huge profits in the process.

Without the North, the South was in great shape with 100 percent control of King Cotton.

Without the South, the North was dead.

To make matters worse, the insatiable greed of Northern leaders in Congress, who were utterly ignorant of basic economic principles, led directly to devastating mistakes such as the astronomical Morrill Tariff. The Morrill Tariff threatened to instantly reroute most US trade from the North into the South because of the South's low tariff. Protective tariffs were unconstitutional in the South where a free trade philosophy reined. The Morrill Tariff added 47 to 60 percent to goods coming into the North. Compare that with the South's 10 percent tariff for the operation of a small federal government in a States' Rights nation. As with all the protective tariffs of the antebellum period, the Northerners who passed the Morrill Tariff assumed it would fall on the South. However, the South was out of the Union and no longer obliged



Confederate fortifications at Yorktown, Virginia, reinforced with cotton bales.

to pay Northern tariffs. This one fell on the North with disastrous effect. Economic historian Philip S. Foner, in his excellent book *Business & Slavery, The New York Merchants & the Irrepressible Conflict*, writes:

On April 1, the Morrill Tariff would go into effect, and after that date, the duties on the principal articles of import would be nearly twice as heavy at New York as they would be at New Orleans, Charleston, and Savannah. The consequences of this difference in duties were not difficult to

see. Anything that had happened thus far in the secession crisis was mild compared with what the immediate future would bring.

The Morrill Tariff was like pumping gasoline into a fire. It was a one-two punch for the North.

The North had lost its manufacturing market because Southerners were dying to get out from under exorbitant Northern prices jacked up by the federal government, which gave Northern businesses protective tariffs, bounties, subsidies, monopoly

protection, etc. Texas Representative John H. Reagan told Northern representatives in Congress in early 1861: "You are not content with the vast millions of tribute we pay you annually under the operation of our revenue law, our navigation laws, your fishing bounties, and by making your people our manufacturers, our merchants, our shippers." Georgia Senator Robert Toombs called it a suction pump sucking wealth out of the South and depositing it in the North, and it was made up of:

Bounties and protection to every interest and every pursuit in the North, to the extent of at least fifty millions per annum, besides the expenditure of at least sixty millions out of every seventy of the public expenditure among them, thus making the treasury a perpetual fertilizing stream to them and their industry, and a suction-pump to drain away our substance and parch up our lands.

Henry L. Benning, one of Robert E. Lee's most able brigadier generals and for whom Fort Benning, Georgia is named, said \$85,000,000, a gargantuan sum in those days, was the amount flowing continually through Robert Toombs's suction pump: "Eighty-five millions is the amount of the drains from the South to the North in one year, $\frac{3}{4}$ drains in return for which the South receives nothing."⁸ The prescient Benning also said:

*The North cut off from Southern cotton, rice, tobacco, and other Southern products would lose three fourths of her commerce, and a very large proportion of her manufactures. And thus those great fountains of finance would sink very low. . . . Would the North in such a condition as that declare war against the South?*⁹

So, the North had lost its manufacturing market due to greed and abuse via the federal government, and now it was going to lose its shipping industry overnight, again because of greed, the unbelievable greed of the Morrill Tariff as Northern ship captains beat a path to the South. Foner goes on:

The war of the tariffs has been ignored in most studies devoted to the antebellum period, yet it is doubtful whether any event during those significant months prior to the outbreak of the War was as influential in molding

*public opinion in the North. Certainly in New York City, it caused a political revolution. It brought to an end any hope that Union could be preserved peacefully.*¹⁰

Southerners were paying three fourths of the taxes going into the federal treasury, but three fourths of the tax money was being spent in the North.¹¹ How long do you think Northerners would tolerate paying three fourths of the taxes if three fourths of the tax money was being spent in the South?

No wonder the Northern states loved the Union, and no wonder Abraham Lincoln said over and over for the first two years of the war the purpose of the war is to preserve the Union, not end slavery. That's why Lincoln supported the Corwin Amendment which left black people in slavery forever, even beyond the reach of Congress, and he used it to lobby seceding governors to stay in the Union. That's why the North's War Aims Resolution of July, 1861, states "this war is not waged upon our part in any spirit of oppression, nor for any purpose of conquest or subjugation, nor for the purpose of overthrowing or interfering with the rights or institutions [slavery] of the States, but to defend and maintain the supremacy of the Constitution [which allowed and protected slavery], and to preserve the Union."¹² That's why the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862 states: "I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy thereof, do hereby proclaim and declare that **HEREAFTER, AS HERETOFORE, THE WAR WILL BE PROSECUTED FOR THE OBJECT OF PRACTICALLY RESTORING THE CONSTITUTIONAL RELATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, AND EACH OF THE [seceded] STATES, . . .**" (Emphasis added). The great Southern writer, William Gilmore Simms, said: "No doubt that, in one sense, they [Northerners] cherish the Union, but only as the agency by which they prosper in uncounted prosperity. It is to them, the very breath of life; it has made them rich and powerful, & keeps them so. No doubt they love the South, but it is as the wolf loves the lamb, coveting and devouring it."¹³

For the North, the War was not about ending slavery. Four slave states fought for the North throughout the War, and West Virginia - the fifth

Union slave state was admitted to the Union during the war. It is an indictment of the North that so few slaves lived in Union states yet the North still refused to abolish slavery. For the North, it was about preserving the Union, which was the source of Northern wealth and power. It was about establishing the supremacy of the federal government over the states (Northerners were the "Federalists" during the War) because that arrangement allowed the North to control business and rule the entire country with its larger population, and it flowed money into the North from the rest of the country.

Even Northern anti-slavery was economic, and it is misnamed. It should be called anti-South instead of anti-slavery because it was in no sense pro-black. Charles P. Roland said "There was a significant economic dimension in the Northern antislavery sentiment" and "a racial factor contributed to the Northern attitude" because:

*Many Northerners objected to the presence of slavery in their midst, in part, because they objected to the presence of blacks there.*¹⁴

This objection to the presence of blacks was also why many Northerners did not want slavery in the West - because they didn't want blacks near them in the West - and most Northern and Western states including Lincoln's Illinois had laws on the books forbidding free blacks from living there or even being there longer than a few days. Historian David M. Potter states that Northern anti-slavery was "not in any clear-cut sense a pro-Negro movement but actually had an anti-Negro aspect and was designed to get rid of the Negro."

From the very beginning, Northerners, especially New Englanders, were America's slave traders who, with the British before them, brought most of the slaves here and made huge fortunes



Charles Dickens

in the process. Even after the slave trade was outlawed in 1808, Northerners still carried it on vigorously right up to the war.¹⁵ Besides, genuine abolitionists in the North were only two to five percent of the electorate¹⁶ and many were hated. Elijah Lovejoy had been murdered in Illinois in 1837.

Charles Dickens, the great British writer also published a periodical *All the Year Round* and was up on current events and horrified by the American war. He said that "Every reasonable creature may know, if willing, that the North hates the Negro, and that until it was convenient to make a pretence

that sympathy with him was the cause of the War, it hated the abolitionists and derided them up hill and down dale."¹⁷ Dickens also said the federal government compelled the South "to pay a heavy fine into the pockets of Northern manufacturers" so that "every feeling and interest on the one side [South] called for political partition, and every pocket interest on the other side [North] for union."¹⁸

For the South, 1861 was 1776 all over. The War was about independence, self-government and maintaining the republic of the Founding Fathers in which states were supreme and the federal government weak and subservient. It was about economic independence and free trade, and not being ruled over by the Republican Party, which had used unbridled hatred and encouragement of terrorism to rally its votes. George Washington had warned that sectional parties would destroy the country, but Wendell Phillips proudly proclaimed the Republican Party is the party of the North pledged against the South.

For the North, war was better than anarchy as Philip S. Foner notes: "It was also exceedingly logical that when all the efforts to save the Union peacefully had failed, the merchants, regardless of political views, should have endorsed the recourse to an armed policy... When they finally became

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aware of the economic chaos secession was causing, when they saw the entire business system crumbling before their very eyes, they knew that there was no choice left. THE UNION MUST BE PRESERVED. ANY OTHER OUTCOME MEANT ECONOMIC SUICIDE."¹⁹ (Emphasis added.)

The Manchester (N.H.) Union Democrat wrote on February 19, 1861, one day after Jefferson Davis's inaugural: "In the manufacturing departments, we now have the almost exclusive supply of 10,000,000 of people. Can this market be cut off, and we not feel it? Our mills run now - why? Because they have cotton.... But they will not run long. We hear from good authority that some of them will stop in sixty days." They went on:

[W]hen people realize the fact that the Union is permanently dissolved, real estate will depreciate one half in a single year. Our population will decrease with the decline of business, and matters will go in geometrical progression from bad to worse until all of us will be swamped in utter ruin.

The Morrill Tariff made things worse. In a March 12, 1861 editorial "What Shall Be Done for a Revenue?" ten days after the passage of the Morrill Tariff, *The New York Evening Post* warned of the hopelessness of the Northern situation:

[A]llow railroad iron to be entered at Savannah with the low duty of ten per cent, which is all that the Southern Confederacy think of laying on imported goods, and not an ounce more would be imported at New York: the railways would be supplied from the Southern ports. Let cotton goods, let woolen fabrics, let the various manufactures of iron and steel be entered freely at Galveston, at the great port at the mouth of the Mississippi, at Mobile, at Savannah and at Charleston, and they would be immediately sent up the rivers and carried on the railways to the remotest parts of the Union.

The New York Evening Post goes on to say that if the taxes aren't collected from the South, then "the sources which supply our treasury will be dried up; we shall have no money to carry on the government; the nation will become bankrupt before the next crop of corn is ripe."

Tennessee Representative Thomas A. R. Nelson, who had submitted the Minority Report of the House Committee of Thirty-three, observed firsthand the crumbling Northern economy. In a speech just before the War, he said:

Three short months ago this great nation was, indeed, prosperous and happy. What a startling, wondrous change has come over it within that brief period! Commercial disaster and distress pervade the land. Hundred and thousands of honest laboring men have been thrown out

of employment; gloom and darkness hang over the people; the tocsin of war has been sounded; the clangor of arms has been heard.

Representative Nelson is talking about the North only, where "the tocsin of war has been sounded; the clangor of arms has been heard." Down South, there was no such feeling of desperation, only triumph, patriotism and jubilation over independence.

Imagine the calculation in the mind of Abraham Lincoln, president of the North, as his region collapsed. He could see no way out. He knew the South controlled the most demanded commodity on the planet, cotton, and he knew the South was tight with England and seeking to be tighter. He knew that once Southerners completed trade and military alliances with Great Britain and other European countries, the North would not be able to beat the South. Because of cotton, the South would ascend to dominance in North America, trading freely with the world.

The Confederate Constitution encouraged free states to join the Confederacy. Slavery was not required. Slavery was up to each state. Southerners were convinced that several Northern and Western states, especially those along the great rivers such as the Mississippi, would join the CSA and this petrified Lincoln. Southerners would also start manufacturing for themselves very soon.

Lincoln knew he had to get the war started as quickly as he possibly could. With each day that went by, the South got stronger and the North got weaker. There was no advantage to waiting a second longer. He was anxious to put up a naval blockade and force Europe to take a wait-and-see attitude toward the South, then he could let the North's huge advantages such as four times the white population, almost all of the country's manufacturing, an army, a navy with fleets of warships, a functioning government with unlimited immigration for the army, huge advantages in armaments, etc. wear out the South. War would also solve his political problems as people rallied to the flag.

The economic issues in play in the spring of 1861 are far more powerful causes of the war than slavery. I have only scratched the surface in this short article.

Endnotes

- 1 Shelby Foote in article "Foote defends flag's meaning," *The (Charleston, SC) Post and Courier*, front page, January 16, 2000.
- 2 Gene Kizer, Jr., *Slavery Was Not the Cause of the War Between the States, The Irrefutable Argument*. (Charleston, SC: Charleston Athenaeum Press, 2014).
- 3 *Daily Chicago Times*, "The Value of the Union," December 10, 1860, in Howard Cecil Perkins, ed., *Northern Editorials on Secession* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1964), Vol. II, 573-574.
- 4 Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, Jennifer Frank, *Complicity, How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 7, 25.
- 5 Philip S. Foner, *Business & Slavery, The New York Merchants & the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 277-278.
- 6 John H. Reagan, "Speech of Representative John H. Reagan of Texas, January 15, 1861," in *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 2 Session, I, 391, as cited in abridged version of Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War*, 3rd revised edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1991), 89.
- 7 Robert Toombs, "Secessionist Speech, Tuesday Evening, November 13" delivered to the Georgia legislature in Milledgeville, November 13, 1860, in William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, *Secession Debated, Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 38.
- 8 Henry L. Benning, "Henry L. Benning's Secessionist Speech, Monday Evening, November 19, 1860, in Freehling and Simpson, *Secession Debated*, 132.
- 9 Henry L. Benning, "Henry L. Benning's Secessionist Speech, Monday Evening, November 19, 1860, in Freehling and Simpson, *Secession Debated*, 132.
- 10 Foner, *Business & Slavery*, 282.
- 11 See earlier quotations of Sen. Robert Toombs, and Henry L. Benning in this article. Also, the *Address of the People of South Carolina, Assented in Convention, to the People of the Slaveholding States of the United States*, adopted 24 December 1860 by the South Carolina Secession Convention, Charleston, S.C. in John Amasa May and Joan Reynolds Faunt, *South Carolina Secedes* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1960).
- 12 The War Aims Resolution passed the US House of Representatives July 22, 1861, and the Senate July 25, 1861. There were only two dissenting votes in the House and five in the Senate.
- 13 William Gilmore Simms, "Antagonisms of the Social Moral. North and South," unpublished 1857 lecture housed in the Charles Carroll Simms Collection of the South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, 38-42.
- 14 Charles P. Roland, *An American Illiad, The Story of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 3.
- 15 Farrow, Lang, Frank, *Complicity*, xxviii.
- 16 Lee Benson, "Explanations of American Civil War Causation" in *Toward the Scientific Study of History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972), 246, 295-303, in Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South, Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 136.
- 17 Charles Dickens, letter to W. W. De Cerjat, 16 March 1862, in Graham Story, ed., *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Vol. Ten, 1862-1864, 53-54.
- 18 The short quotations from Charles Dickens come from articles that are all quoted in Charles Adams, *When in the Course of Human Events, Arguing the Case for Southern Secession* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 90-91.
- 19 Foner, *Business & Slavery*, 322.
- 20 *The Manchester (N.H.) Union Democrat*, "Let Them Go!" editorial of February 19, 1861 in Perkins, ed., *Northern Editorials on Secession*, Vol. II, 592.
- 21 *New York Evening Post*, March 12, 1861, "What Shall Be Done for a Revenue?" in Perkins, ed., *Northern Editorials on Secession*, Vol. II, 598.
- 22 Thomas A. R. Nelson, "Speech of Hon. Thomas A. R. Nelson, of Tennessee, On the Disturbed condition of the Country" (Washington: H. Polkinhorn, 1861), 1-12.

