

Ideological,  
economical, political  
and social differences



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Ideological differences were a key factor in making the civil war an inevitable event. However it was not an ideological split over the belief of slavery being right or wrong which caused the armed conflict. To suggest otherwise would be an inaccurate interpretation. While it may be true that abolitionist agitation provoked a negative southern reaction and caused southerners to become radical in their defence of slavery, abolitionists were a rather insignificant minority. The majority of Northerners were moderates and not necessarily concerned about the moral aspect of slavery. In reality, the North differed very little from the South in their attitude towards white supremacy. It was differences in economic ideology that was the fundamental difference between North and South which necessitated each side resorting to armed conflict. Ideological extremists on both sides served to widen the gulf between the North and South.

Abolitionists in the North provoked the South into a defensive position regarding slavery. That resulted in a redefinition of slavery in the Southern ideology. Slavery had started out as a “ necessary evil” but was eventually transformed into an “ ultimate good.” That transformation created something known as the ‘ magnolia myth’. Southerners now defended slavery arguing that it was better than the capitalist system in which workers were nothing more than an exploited unit of labour. They argued that slaves received food, shelter, health care and even old age security. The North remained staunch in its defence of free labour and capitalist ideology. Thus the two sides developed distinctly different ideologies that were opposed to each other.

The actions of radical abolitionist John Brown did the most to provoke Southern paranoia about Northern intentions toward the Southern way of life. The Harpers Ferry incident had the effect of reinforcing the siege mentality of the South. As North and South moved further apart ideologically, they inevitably came closer to war. The actions of Northern extremists such as John Brown was all the evidence the South needed for them to believe that the North wanted their destruction. The South therefore, felt the need to defend itself from attack. In addition to ideological differences that made war inevitable, there were also important economic differences that made peaceful reconciliation unlikely.

By the end of the eighteenth century economic superiority rested with the industrialized North; the South was experiencing growing doubts surrounding the viability of growing cotton. There had been a drop in the importation of slaves and a steep decline of the southern economy. If the economy had continued to decline, slave labour would have eventually died out on its own; there was little need for slave labour. That all changed with the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin in 1793. Slavery was revived because cotton production had become profitable again. So profitable in fact that the South would defend it militarily if needed. Historian James M. McPherson termed the South's move to leave the union as a "counterrevolution" which they undertook in order to preserve their economic system, which they feared would be destroyed by a "revolution" signalled by the election of Lincoln. It is my opinion that Southern secession was an inevitable step for the South to take in response to what it saw as the ultimate threat to their way of life. However, due to the North's core belief that national preservation and the

will of the majority superseded the South's right of free government and self-determination, it necessitated the very revolution which the South sought to avoid.

In 1854, Senator Stephen Douglas' economic proposal of a trans-continental railroad set the stage for a conflict which signalled the end of political compromise. The Kansas-Nebraska act which was a direct result of the economic conflict overturned the Missouri compromise. The 'bleeding Kansas' incident heightened tensions on both sides and provides further evidence to suggest that the inherent economic conflicts could not be contained through political diplomacy. The sections had all ready resorted to arms to solve their differences and it was merely a matter of time until the violence escalated into a civil war. The different economic structures of the North and the South were a fundamental division that made conflict inevitable. The South was staunchly anti-tariff and was therefore incompatible with the North which needed tariffs to protect their new industries. Failure to compromise in regards to the tariff of 1828 and the issue of protectionism were important factors in the growth of sectionalism which necessitated war.

The underlying conflicts between the North and the South were finally fully exposed as a result of a failure of compromise in the political arena. The failure of American leadership in 1846-1861 was epitomised by key events such as Senator Douglas's Kansas Nebraska act of 1854 and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857. Both of those events overturned the previous Missouri compromise that stood for nearly thirty years and thus once again brought the two opposing nations head to head. The Wilmot

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proviso bill which proposed to eliminate slavery in the territories acquired from Mexico as a result of the Mexican war was a clear signal to the South that the North was plotting against its way of life. Thus the Southern mindset became increasingly locked in a persecution complex which they justified by evidence of a 'Northern conspiracy' to destroy their economic institutions. The Wilmot proviso bill was one such piece of evidence – even though it was not passed. The election of Lincoln was the final straw with which the South believed the Northern conspirators would gain the upper hand and bring about the destruction of Southern institutions.

Had compromise been utilised more frequently the war may have been postponed but not all together avoided. The opposing Nations of North and South had an uneasy balance of power in the House of Representatives ever since the very formation of the bicameral legislature. Tensions since then until the onset of war arose over whether the new territories would become free or slave. However, the uneasy balance had been preserved for the most part by compromise, thus as historians Charles and Marry Beard stated “ the balance of power might have been maintained indefinitely by repeating the compensatory tactics of 1787, 1820, and 1850; keeping in this manner the inherent antagonisms within the bounds of diplomacy.” However as they pointed out, there were inherent antagonisms within the system and therefore one side would inevitably have to declare its side victorious in one way or another – war was inevitable.

Charles and Mary Beard also saw the American civil war in terms of a class conflict and renamed the war the “ second American Revolution.” For the Beards “ the resort to arms in 1861 precipitated by secession was merely a <https://assignbuster.com/ideological-economical-political-and-social-differences/>

façade for a more deeply rooted conflict.” They felt that the civil war “ was a social war, ending in the unquestioned establishment of a new power in the government, making vast changes in the arrangement of classes, in the accumulation and distribution of wealth.” This interpretation holds a great deal of accuracy when put in to context with the opposing forces in the civil war. On one side was democracy and on the other side was a form of landed aristocracy. With that in mind it is easy to see – to an extent – the correlation between the US Civil War and European revolutions such as the French Revolution and much later the Russian Revolution. However not all countries had a revolution during the nineteenth century and thus it by no means makes an “ American social revolution” inevitable. However the unique political landscape of America did make unavoidable a confrontation between old aristocratic values and new liberal values. The way the country had been divided over the issue of slavery allowed the conservative South to distinctly separate itself from the modernised North, yet the possibility of conflict always existed because they were bound together by one constitution.

### **The Case Against the War Being Inevitable:**

The case for the war being an avoidable conflict stressed the fact that Americans had lived with the issues that eventually led to the outbreak of war for generations. Thus historians who adhere to that theory claim that there was a strong possibility for a compromise to be found, using as a basis for their argument the evidence of the numerous pre-war compromises which alleviated sectional tensions. Revisionist historians account for the breakout of the Civil War by asserting that the vital instrument of

compromise was neglected by a “ blundering generation” in the events leading up to the Civil War. The theory of a “ blundering generation” holds validity to an extent. However this very theory in itself destroys the idea that the war was an avoidable conflict, for it only highlights the extent of the serious divisions in the country which could not be resolved irrespective of how many compromises either side conceded. The core issues such as that of free labour contradicting slave labour still remained. One side would have to destroy the ideals of the other in order to finally put to rest the dividing issues. Only then could the States be truly united. It could also be argued that revisionist historians writing in the 1930s and 1940s lacked accurate historical context because they “ examined the causes of the Civil War at a time when war as a means of solving problems was not considered to be a sound solution.” They saw war as a great evil whereas in the nineteenth-century, war was seen as a justifiable means of solving problems. Thus in the eyes of nineteenth-century politicians, armed conflict would have been seen as an inevitable step in order to advance their political ideology once an opportunity arose.

In the case of the American civil war, Southern secession was the opportunity seized upon by the North. The lack of a strong anti-violence movement in the events leading up to the civil war strongly suggests the acceptable nature of war in order to resolve issues and illustrates the extent to which sectionalism had grown and divided the country into two separate nations. Hence one could argue that the very nature of nineteenth-century global politics made the civil war an inevitable event. Avery Craven and James G. Randall were two of the most prominent revisionist historians who

challenged the inevitability of the Civil War. However their anti-war thesis was dismissed by Arthur M. Schlesinger who proposed one key question which they had not taken into account “: if the war could have been avoided, what course should American leaders have followed?” Schlesinger provided three possible alternatives: “ that the South might have abolished slavery by itself if left alone; that slavery would have died because it was economically unsound; or that the North might have offered some form of emancipated compensation.” Schlesinger found all three alternatives to be completely unviable.

In conclusion, the civil war was an inevitable occurrence; too many factors leading up to the civil war had the effect of exacerbating the fundamental differences between the North and the South. Lincoln as well as many other statesmen believed that the country could not continue to exist as two nations under one government. In some form the two incompatible ideologies had to settle their differences. However, because the differences were so fundamentally important to each section, political compromise would have ultimately led only to one side’s economic and social ideology being wiped out; both sides were unwilling to let their institutions be damaged by the other. Eli Whitney’s invention changed the stakes as it revived a dying institution and set it in place as king of the southern economy without which the South felt it could not survive. The North and the South did not develop along similar economically or ideologically. That created an inherent instability in America. At some stage the two opposing sections would inevitably come into military conflict once all compromises were exhausted.