

Causes of the rise of sectionalism



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Thesis

Although the issue of states' rights and western expansion were crucial in the rise of sectional strife between northern states, the evidence overwhelming suggests that sectionalism caused by the institution of slavery was the primary factor in the outbreak of the United States Civil War (1861–65).

The issue of sectionalism began even before the country became a country when federalist were attempting to get the original 13 to ratify the constitution. The colonies fearing that a strong central government would be as tyrannical like the one they left proposed creating a system with a weak central government and strong state governments. This system proved to be inefficient and the founding fathers proposed a compromise, a system of government that would have a central government strong enough to maintain prosperity in the union yet weak enough that it would not be unfair to the state governments. Supporters of this compromise were called federalists and largely consisted of northern states. Opponents of this compromise were called anti-federalist and were generally from southern states and were led by a southerner Thomas Jefferson. In order to get the antifederalist southern states to ratify the constitution James Madison wrote the bill of rights. One key factor that made bill of rights acceptable to the antifederalist states was the 10th amendment which states verbatim that “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” (US Const. amend. X) This quelled the issue of which rights belong to states and the federal government.

The conflict of states' rights vs federal rights would once again become a hot button issue with the nullification crisis of the 1830's and almost plunge the union into full scale civil war. This conflict ensued after John C Calhoun a South Carolina politician proposed the nullification act of 1832 which declared any laws deemed unconstitutional by the state to be null and void. This act was a response to the tariffs of 1828 and 1830 which promoted northern manufacturing by taxing the importation of manufactured European goods. In practice this would favor northern states whose economy relied on manufacturing and hurt southern states whose economy relied on the exportation of cotton and the importation of manufactured goods. South Carolina threatened to secede from the union which led to President Andrew Jackson threatening armed conflict with South Carolina. Ultimately the conflict was resolved without violence but it added to the sectionalism between southern and northern states.

This nullification crisis raises three questions that would eventually lead to great dispute among the nation. Does the federal government have the right to add tariffs to the constitution? Does the state have the right to nullify a law if it deems it unconstitutional? Does a state have the right to leave the union?

During the nineteenth century the expansion of the peculiar institution in the western territories acquired from the Louisiana Purchase and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Southerners who were moving west wanted to bring slaves with them in for economic, political, and social gain of their individual person and their section. Northerners feared that southerners would diffuse the peculiar institution to the west and ultimately the entire union. In order

to quell the rising conflict between northerners and southern and prevent civil war the federal legislature began fixing the issues by enacting compromises that would appeal to both sections. The first of which is the Missouri compromise of 1820. Prior to the addition of Missouri into the union both the slaveholding southern states and the free northern states had a balanced amount of representatives in the senate. The addition a new state would shift the balance of power in the senate. In order to avoid conflict the Missouri Compromise was put into place and allowed Missouri to enter the union as a southern slave state and create Maine a free state in order maintain balance in the senate. It also permitted that any new states south of the 36 30 parallel to become slave states and the other way around. This however did not solve the issue sectionalism from western expansion it only swept the problem under the rug until it would resurface in the compromise of 1850.

Ultimately the common denominator in all these factors is the issue of slavery. Sectionalism was caused by the issue of states' rights to the slavery and personal treatment of slaves. Sectional strife was caused by the expansion of the peculiar institution into western territories.

Initially most northerners ignored the issue of slavery as it had a minimal role in their everyday life. Over time abolitionists in the north who saw slavery as morally repugnant would enter the south and advocate for the immediate destruction of the peculiar institution. They argued god was against the institution of slavery and that a nation who would practice such an anti-god institution would be damned. The southern slave holders would ask where in the bible it says god was against slavery. In reality the bible has <https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-rise-of-sectionalism/>

multiple verses that would lead one to believe that god condones slavery.

Ephesians 6 verse 5 states “ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”

Common characteristics of southerners during this time period were quickness to anger when insulted and pride so naturally they would take offense to the claims of the abolitionists. To the average southerner an abolitionist coming from the north represented northerners as whole. They asked themselves “ Who is this northerner to come into my home question and insult my way of life when they have their own form of slavery up north with their treatment of factory workers.” This created a sense of resentment and eventual hatred of northerners in the south and fuel sectionalism.

The nail on the coffin to the sectional hate between northerners and southerners is the John Brown raid and its relation to the subsequent presidential election of republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860. The biggest fear of southerners was another slave revolt like the one in Haiti. This would come to the forefront of their minds when John Brown a republican and avid abolitionist organizes a raid on the ammunitions arsenal in Virginia in order to sponsor slave revolts. After a 3 day siege colonel Robert E Lee is able to recapture the arsenal and arrest John Brown. After his execution Southerners considered John Brown to be a terrorist whereas the Northerners considered him a martyr. This would ultimately fuel even more resentment and sectionalism. The south felt as though the north hated their fellow countrymen so much that they would result to terrorism. The last straw would be the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 a republican just like John Brown. To the southerners Abraham Lincoln was just another John Brown due

to his party affiliation. They thought that Abraham Lincoln, his party, and the rest of the north after having already lost the political battle over slavery due to the verdict of the Dredd Scott vs Sanford trial would fund slave revolts.

Enabling the south's worst fear. For this reason 11 of the southernmost decided that it would be in their best interest to leave the union out of fear that the institution of slavery would be abolished like in Haiti and a resounding hate for everything that the northern states represented.

To add fuel to the fire the secession documents of each and every southern state made it abundantly clear that they were leaving the union in order to preserve the institution of slavery which they feel will be continuously threatened by northerners. “ Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery- the greatest material interest of the world.”(Mississippi) “ The Federal Government, having perverted said powers, not only to the injury of the people of Virginia, but to the oppression of the Southern Slaveholding States.”(Virginia)“...we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slave-holding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery. They have endeavored to weaken our security, to disturb our domestic peace and tranquility, and persistently refused to comply with their express constitutional obligations to us in reference to that property...”(Georgia) “...’ A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery...”(South Carolina)

Some would argue that only a small portion of the southern population to discredit the claim that slavery was the primary cause of southern secession. However the institution of slavery benefited more than just the slave owners it ensured that the non-slaveholding whites would not fall to the bottom of the social hierarchy and that they would have the goal of gathering enough funds that they could buy their own slaves and join the elites of southern society.

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