

What caused the civil war



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The Civil War marked a major turning point in American history; the slaughter and the defeat of the South changed the way Americans see themselves to this day. But the period immediately before the war was also a turning point, as new technologies shifted the way people lived, worked, and raised families. Many people believe the big thing that caused the war was slavery, but there is a strong argument to be made that the technological changes in the period before the war put a great strain on the economy and culture of the United States that dramatically increased the odds of war. The technological changes in the mid-19th century were extensive. To begin with, agriculture, long a staple of the South, and an important livelihood in a country that had not yet rapidly urbanized, was hugely important. The steel plow and the mechanical reaper were invented in this period and allowed for farmers to spend less energy harvesting and to produce greater yields (Boyer, et al, 238). New irrigation techniques also provided more arable land.

An additional technological change that had a big impact was the rise of railroads (Boyer, et al, 240). Rail coverage expanded nearly ten times over a twenty year period. Americans of all classes were able to travel freely and comfortably. Perhaps more than anything this helped to open up the West during this period.

Culture was rapidly increasing during this period too, as American writers looked inward to their soul and outward to their growing country. Writers like Dickinson, Thoreau and Emerson published works that began the process of defining what it meant to be American. A definition that would be sorely tested during the Civil War.

The president at the time, Abraham Lincoln was a very principled and serious

lawyer who cared a lot about his country. He fought against politicians who were pro-slavery, but he was conflicted about what the solution to this terrible problem. When he became president at first he didn't believe the solution was to free all the slaves, nor did he think this was the most important issue in the Civil War between North and South. He saw too many shades of grey. But as the war progressed, he began to see that slavery was the main issue and he would have to do something about it. Slavery was an important issue, but one thing that Lincoln didn't understand was how technology was changing things dramatically. One of the great consequences of technology was that it allowed the war to be that much more vicious and to kill many more people than expected. This entrenched both sides in their positions and caused the war to last longer.

The twenty year period before the American Civil War was a period of great development and change. Agriculture improved and railways became more prominent. American artists and writers won new respect. These changes created the fertile ground upon which the seeds of the war were sown.

Slavery was important but it did not cause the war—new technology and social upheaval did. It is deeply unfortunate much of this growth was lost in the slaughter of the Civil War.

Works consulted

Boyer, P., Clark, C., Kett, J., Salisbury, N., Sitkoff, H., & Woloch, N. The enduring vision: A history of the American people Vol. 1: to 1877. (6th ed). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008.

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Boyer, P., Clark, C., Kett, J., Salisbury, N., Sitkoff, H., & Woloch, N. (2008).

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The enduring vision: A history of the American people Vol. 1: to 1877. (6th ed). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.