

## **Background Causes of the Civil War**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

The Civil War that began in the spring of 1861 had its origins in the very founding of the nation. The differences between north and south grew during the 1800s until, by the late 1850s, it appeared that an “irrepressible conflict” was imminent. Political, economic, and social differences between the two regions of the country were evident from the late 1700s. In the south, adherents to the concept of states’ rights contended that the states served as a vital constitutional check on abuses of power by the federal government. They strongly supported the principles of the Tenth Amendment, designed to restrict national power and delegate powers not specifically held by the federal government to the states. Others, including many in the north, maintained that the national government should stand supreme over the states and that it possessed broad implied powers based on the “elastic clause” in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution.

Economic differences also separated north and south. As early as the late 1700s and early 1800s, the economies of the northern states became more diversified, as manufacturing interests increased in power. The development of the cotton gin, meanwhile, reinforced agriculture as the dominant economic activity in the south. This led to disagreements, for example, over government aid to manufacturing and the issue of internal improvements. Debates over tariffs also split the two sections of the country. Most northerners supported higher tariffs, or taxes on imports, both as a means of raising revenue and of protecting domestic manufacturing from foreign imports. Southerners questioned the constitutionality of high “protective” tariffs, and believed that the tendency of the federal congress to approve higher

tariffs was a dangerous example of the growing political and economic dominance of the north. In the 1830s, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the tariff issue culminated in the Nullification Crisis, in which South Carolina proclaimed it had nullified a tariff adopted by the federal government. Though a political compromise at the time averted armed conflict, the crisis foreshadowed an even greater one to come thirty years later, precipitated over the election of Abraham Lincoln and the pronouncement by southerners that they had an inherent right to secede from the Union if they felt that their rights were being violated.

The issue of slavery only worsened the political and economic differences between the two regions. During the colonial period, slavery had existed in both northern and southern colonies, though the institution was always strongest in the south. During the revolutionary era and its aftermath, the northern states adopted immediate or gradual emancipation, while southerners remained committed to the “Peculiar Institution” as an economic and social necessity. In the early-to-mid 1800s, a vocal abolitionist movement developed in the north that, while it consisted of only a minority of the population, gradually began to shift public opinion against the institution, and particularly against the expansion of slavery into new western territories. The number of slave and free states had remained equal since the nation’s founding, with the Mason-Dixon Line and Ohio River marking the dividing line between slave and free territory. In the period 1819-1821, controversy over the admission of Missouri into the Union brought the issue of slavery to national prominence, but a compromise delineated the free and slave portions of the Louisiana Purchase lands and helped maintain peace for the next several decades. Still, the presence by mid-century of nearly 4,000,000 slaves in the southern states was viewed as intolerable by an increasing number of northerners, while southerners viewed threats to the institution as an attack on their entire way of life. The acquisition of new territory as a

result of the Mexican War and a series of sectional crises during the 1850s only worsened tensions and made secession and perhaps civil war more likely.