

## Civil War

IN THIS meeting of the Southern Historical Association great emphasis has been placed upon a re-examination of numerous phases of our history relating to the Civil War. While several papers have dealt with certain forces which helped bring about the Civil War, none has attempted a general synthesis of causes. This synthesis has been the task assumed by the retiring president of the Association. Before attempting to say what were the causes of the American Civil War, first let me say what were not the causes of this war. Perhaps the most beautiful, the most poetic, the most eloquent statement of what the Civil War was not fought for is Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. That address will live as long as Americans retain their love of free government and personal liberty; and yet in reassessing the causes of the Civil War, the address whose essence was that the war was being fought so "that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth" is irrelevant. Indeed, this masterpiece of eloquence has little if any value as a statement of the basic principles underlying the war. The Civil War was not a struggle on the part of the South to destroy free government and personal liberty nor on the part of the North to preserve them. Looked at from the present perspective of the world-wide attempt of the totalitarians to erase free governments and nations living under such governments from the face of the earth, the timeworn stereotype that the South was attempting the destruction of free government and the North was fighting to preserve it seems very unrealistic and downright silly. In the light of the present-day death struggle between freedom and the most brutal form of despotism, the Civil War, as far as the issue of free government was involved, was a sham battle. Indeed, both northern and southern people in 1861 were alike profoundly attached to the principles of free government. A systematic study of both northern and southern opinion as expressed in their newspapers, speeches, diaries, and private letters, gives irrefutable evidence in support of this assertion. Their ideology was democratic and identical. However, theoretical adherence to the democratic principles, as veil we know all too well in these days of plutocratic influences in our political life, is not sufficient evidence that democratic government exists. I believe that I shall not be challenged in the assertion that the economic structure of a section or a nation is the foundation upon which its political structure must rest. For this reason, therefore, it will be necessary to know what the economic foundations of these sections were. Was the economic structure of the North such as to support a political democracy in fact as well as in form? And was the economic structure of the South such as to permit the existence of free government? Time does not permit an extended treatment of this subject; it will be possible only to point out certain conclusions based upon recent research. By utilizing the county tax books and the unpublished census reports a group of us conducting a cooperative undertaking have been able to obtain a reasonably accurate and specific picture of wealth structure of the antebellum South, and to some extent that of the other sections. We have paid particular attention to the distribution of capital wealth and the ownership of the means of production. As has been generally known the Northwest was agricultural and its population predominantly small farmers, though a considerable minority were large farmers comparable with the southern planters. It seems that in 1860 about 80 percent of the farmers in the Old Northwest were landowners. A fairly large fraction of the remaining farm population in that area were either squatters upon public lands or were the members of landowning families. Only a small per cent were renters. In those areas farther west the ownership of land was not as widespread because the farmers had not yet made good their titles to the lands that they had engrossed. Taken as a whole the people of the Northwest were economically self-sufficient. They could not be subjected to economic coercion and, hence, they were politically free. Their support of free government-as they understood it-was effective.

The northeastern section of the United States had already assumed its modem outlines of a capitalistic-industrial society where the means of production were either owned or controlled by relatively few. That is to say, New England and the

middle states were fast becoming in essence a plutocracy whose political ideology was still strongly democratic; but the application of this democratic ideology was being seriously hampered by the economic dependence of the middle and lower classes upon those who owned the tools of production. The employee unprotected by government supervision or by strong labor organizations was subject in exercising his political rights to the undue influence of the employer.

To sum up: the economic structure of the Northwest was an adequate foundation for free government; but that of the East, though still supporting democratic ideals, was often too weak to sustain these ideals in actual government.

Turning to the South which was primarily agricultural we find the situation completely contradictory to what has usually been assumed. While the plutocracy of the East owned or controlled the means of production in industry and commerce, the so-called slave oligarchy of the South owned scarcely any of the land outside the black belt and only about 25 per cent of the land in the black belt. Actually, the basic means of production in the black belt and in the South as a whole was well distributed among all classes of the population. The overwhelming majority of southern families in 1860 owned their farms and livestock. About 90 per cent of the slaveholders and about 70 per cent of the non-slaveholders owned the land which they farmed. The bulk of slave holders were small farmers and not oligarchs. While taken together they owned more slaves and more land than the big planters, taken individually the majority of slaveholders owned from one to four slaves and less than three hundred acres of land. The non-slaveholders, 70 percent of whom, as we have noted, were landowners, were not far removed economically from the small slaveholders to whom we have just referred. While the majority of slaveholders owned from one to three hundred acres of land, 80 per cent of the landowning non-slaveholders owned from one to two hundred acres of land and 20 per cent owned from two hundred to a thousand. Let me repeat: the basic fact disclosed in an analysis of the economic structure of the South, based upon the unpublished census reports and tax books, is that the overwhelming majority of white families in the South, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, unlike the industrial population of the East, owned the means of production. In other words, the average southerner like the average westerner possessed economic independence; and the only kind of influence that could be exercised over his political franchise by the slave oligarchy was a strictly persuasive kind. The South then, like the Northwest, not only held strongly to the democratic ideology but also had a sound economic foundation for a free government.

If the destruction of democratic government by the South and its preservation by the North were not the causes of the Civil War, what then were the causes? The surface answer to this question is that in 1861 the southern people desired and attempted to establish their independence and thereby to disrupt the old Union; and that the North took up arms to prevent the South from establishing this independence and to preserve the Union. Looking immediately behind this attempt of the South to establish a separate government, and of the North to prevent it, we discover a state of mind in both sections which explains their conduct. This state of mind may be summed up thus: by the spring of 1861 the southern people felt it both abhorrent and dangerous to continue to live under the same government with the people of the North. So profound was this feeling among the bulk of the southern population that they were prepared to fight a long and devastating war to accomplish a separation. On the other hand, the North was willing to fight a war to retain their reluctant fellow citizens under the same government with themselves.

The cause of that state of mind which we may well call war psychosis lay in the sectional character of the United States. In other words, the Civil War had one basic cause: sectionalism. But to conclude that sectionalism was the cause of the Civil War, and at the same time insist -as has usually been done-that the Civil War was the climax of an irrepressible conflict, is to seem to accept a pessimistic view of the future of the United States. For if the antebellum conflict was irrepressible and the Civil War unavoidable, we are faced with future irrepressible conflicts, future civil wars, and ultimate disintegration of the nation into its component sections. I say this because I do not see anyway save some cosmic

cataclysm by which sectionalism can be erased from the political, economic, racial, and cultural maps of the United States. Our national state was built, not upon the foundations of a homogeneous land and people, but upon geographical sections inhabited severally by provincial, self-conscious, self-righteous, aggressive, and ambitious populations of varying origins and diverse social and economic systems; and the passage of time and the cumulative effects of history have accentuated these sectional patterns.

Before accepting the possibility of future wars and national disintegration as inevitable because of the irrepressible conflict between permanent sections, let me hasten to say that there are two types of sectionalism: there is that egocentric, destructive sectionalism where conflict is always irrepressible; and there is that constructive sectionalism where good will prevails—two types as opposite from one another as good is opposite from evil, as the benign is from the malignant. It was the egocentric, the destructive, the evil, the malignant type of sectionalism that destroyed the Union in 1861, and that would do so again if it existed over a long period of time.

Before discussing that destructive sectionalism which caused the Civil War, some observations should be made of the constructive type, since, as I have suggested, the very nature of the American state makes one or the other type of sectionalism inevitable. The idea of either good or bad sectionalism as an enduring factor in American national life has received scant consideration by historians as a rule, either because they, who have usually been of the North, have desired to justify the conduct of their section on occasion as being the manifestation of nationalism when in truth it was sectionalism writ large; or because, and more important, they have apparently been unable to reconcile sectionalism with nationalism.

Since sectionalism from the very nature of our country must remain a permanent and basic factor in our national life, we should look it in the face and discriminate between the good and the bad features. Above all else, we should recognize the fact that sectionalism when properly dealt with, far from being irreconcilable with nationalism, is its strongest support. It is only the malignant, destructive type that conflicts with nationalism or loyalty to the national state or empire. Great Britain once failed to make this distinction and to grasp the fact that the American colonials could be good Americans and good British at the same time, and the result was the loss of the American colonies. After the lesson learned from the American Revolution, the British mind grasped the fact that good Canadians or good Australians are all the better British because of their provincial or—may I say?—sectional loyalty. Provincialism, dominionism, and, in the case of the United States, sectionalism, far from excluding nationalism, when properly recognized and not constantly frowned upon, and the interests of sections ignored and their ambitions frustrated, are powerful supports of nationalism. Such provincialism or sectionalism becomes a national asset. It is a brake upon political centralization and possible despotism. It has proven and will prove to be, if properly directed, a powerful force in preserving free institutions. It gives color, variety, and vitality to all segments of the national state. Because of this vitality in all its parts, the United States, unlike France whose lifeblood seems to flow entirely through Paris, would prove a difficult country to subjugate by a foreign enemy, and its government and society more difficult, if not impossible, to overthrow by violent revolution. It is because Great Britain has, as the result of her lesson learned from the American Revolution, fostered a good sectionalism within her empire, that she has baffled the orderly mind of the Germans and defied conquest. By loosening the ties that bind the component parts of this straggling union of colonies and dominions, Great Britain has made these bonds all the stronger. She and her commonwealth of nations thus live in all their parts. Tragically the American people failed to learn adequately the very lesson that they so thoroughly taught Great Britain: that local differences and attachments were natural, desirable, and formed the very rootbed of patriotism; indeed, that such differences, when given decent recognition, greatly strengthened nationalism and the national state. It was this failure to recognize or respect local differences and interests, in other words, the failure to recognize sectionalism as a

fundamental fact of American life, that contributed most to the development of that kind of sectionalism which destroyed national unity and divided the nation. There were three basic manifestations of that egocentric sectionalism which disrupted the Union in 1861. First, was the habit of the dominant section—that is, the section which had the larger share in the control of the Federal government—of considering itself the nation, its people the American people, its interests the national interests; in other words, the habit of considering itself the sole possessor of nationalism, when, indeed, it was thinking strictly in terms of one section; and conversely the habit of the dominant section of regarding the minority group as factional, its interests and institutions and way of life as un-American, unworthy of friendly consideration, and even the object of attack.

The second manifestation of this egocentric sectionalism that led to the Civil War was the perennial attempt of a section to gain or maintain its political ascendancy over the Federal government by destroying the sectional balance of power which, both New England and the South maintained, had been established by the three-fifths ratio clause in the Federal Constitution.

The third and most dangerous phase of this sectionalism, perhaps the sine qua non of the Civil War, was the failure to observe what in international law is termed the comity of nations, and what we may by analogy designate as the comity of sections. That is, the people in one section failed in their language and conduct to respect the dignity and self-respect of the people in the other section. These three manifestations of sectionalism were so closely related that at times they can be segregated only in theory and for the sake of logical discussion. Indeed, as I have suggested, all were manifestations of that egocentric sectionalism that caused a section to regard itself as the nation.

Let me call to your mind some familiar facts of American history that illustrate each of these phases of sectionalism. During the first twelve years of the government under the Federal Constitution, the old commercial-financial aristocracy of New England, with the aid of the same classes of people scattered throughout the urban centers of the seaboard, controlled the national government through the instrumentality of the Federalist party. An analysis of the chief measures of the Federalist regime and of the mental processes behind their enactments—as disclosed in speeches and letters and newspaper editorials—reveals the dominant section, New England, with its compact, homogeneous population, its provincial outlook, thinking, talking, and acting as if it were the United States; its way of life, its economic system, and its people the only truly American; while the remainder of the country, the people, and their interests and ways of life were alien and un-American. Most of the laws enacted during the control of the New England Federalists were considered by the South and much of the middle states as being for the sole benefit of the commercial and banking interests of the East, and as injurious, even ruinous, to the agricultural sections. In order to give constitutional sanction to these centralizing, sectional laws, the Federalist party under the brilliant leadership of Alexander Hamilton evolved the doctrine of implied powers, which seemed to the agricultural sections, now under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson, to be pulling the foundations from under constitutional government. This sectional and centralizing policy of the New England-dominated Federalist party culminated in the Alien and Sedition Laws which were met by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. These resolutions may be regarded as a campaign document to be used in ousting the Federalists and New England from power. They were also a threat of the minority section to withdraw from the Union should Federalist New England continue in power and continue its policy of ignoring the agricultural sections of the country or of running roughshod over their interests.

The overthrow of New England's control of the national government by the Jeffersonian party in 1800 resulted in a twenty-four-year regime of the Virginia dynasty, during fifteen years of which—that is, until after the War of 1812—the government was distinctly dominated by the South and Southwest. If Hamilton had been positive that the welfare of the nation depended upon reinforcing and maintaining by special government favor the capitalistic system of the East, Jefferson was more positive that democratic and constitutional government and the

welfare of the American people depended upon maintaining the supremacy in government and society of a landowning farmer-people whose center of gravity was in the South and middle states. To Jefferson, commerce, finance, and industry were only necessary evils to be maintained purely as conveniences and handmaidens of agriculture. Such doctrinaire conception of government and society boded it for New England; and the period from 1801 until the end of the War of 1812 was filled with laws, decrees, and executive acts that seemed to threaten the economic and social existence of that section. One measure in particular seemed to be destined to end forever in favor of the South the sectional balance of power, namely, the purchase of Louisiana. During all this time New England's standing committee on secession, the Essex Junto, was maneuvering to bring about the withdrawal of New England from the Federal Union; nor is there any sufficient reason to suppose that it would not have eventually succeeded in the disruption of the Union had not the ending of the war with Great Britain brought a termination of the policies that seemed so detrimental to the social and economic interests of the East; and had not the outburst of genuine nationalism at the victorious ending of the war actually resulted in the adoption of measures distinctly favorable to New England. The point that I wish to emphasize is that the rise to power of the South and middle states was marked by the same egocentric sectionalism as characterized the dominance of Federalist New England: the agricultural sections thought of themselves as the United States, thought of the American farmers as the only simon-pure Americans, and looked upon the interests of the agricultural population as the national interests.

It is not the ambition of this paper to attempt a summary of the antebellum history of the United States; but simply to use the twelve year sectional regime of the Federalists and about the same length of rule by the Jeffersonian party to illustrate that tendency of the dominant section to consider itself the United States and its people the American people, and by the same token ignore or treat with contempt the peculiar needs of the minority sections.

The second manifestation of that egocentric sectionalism which led to the American Civil War was, as you will recall, the attempt of one section to gain a permanent ascendancy by destroying the sectional balance of power or permanently undermining the prestige of the other section. Let me pause for a moment, in discussing the overthrow of the balance of power, and review for you very briefly just how and why there had been an approximate balance of power established between the slaveholding and non-slaveholding states during the constitutional convention. The delegates to the convention, from both the northern and southern sections of the country, were unanimously in favor of a constitution that would establish a much stronger and more effective government than that which had so signally broken down under the Articles of Confederation. There was a fundamental difference, however, as to what specific powers should be granted to this new government. New England and the capitalistic segments of the middle states were above all else determined that the new government should be able to control foreign and interstate commerce and to make commercial treaties that could be enforced. The agricultural sections of the country looked with considerable disfavor upon such a grant of powers. The South was so much opposed that it quietly passed out the word that it would never enter a Union where commerce was so thoroughly controlled by the national government unless it were assured a position of approximate political equality in that government. Otherwise, the power over commerce would be used by the North, dominated by the East, for its sole benefit and to the detriment of agriculture and the South.

Finally, the balance of power was worked out by the technique of counting three-fifths of the slaves in apportioning representation in Congress and in the electoral college. This was called the three-fifths compromise between the North, which wanted to count all the slaves in apportioning direct taxes and none in apportioning representatives, and the South, which wanted to count all the slaves in making up representation and none in making up taxation. But an examination of the speeches and correspondence of the delegates indicates that it was also, and more important, a means of giving the South approximate equality in the Federal government in return for granting New England's profound desire to have the Federal

government control interstate and international commerce.

That the sectional balance of power should be obtained by the process of counting three-fifths of the slaves in determining representation was a natural but unfortunate arrangement. It was natural inasmuch as the Southerner regarded his slave as a human being and as part of the population; it was unfortunate in that it quickly identified the political influence of the South with the institution of slavery, and in doing so it went far toward engendering or increasing hostility in New England and finally in the whole North toward both slavery and the South.

As long as New England was able to dominate the Federal government there was no important opposition to the theoretical balance of power obtained by the three-fifths ratio; but when New England lost her status with the collapse of the Federalist party her leaders immediately seized upon the three-fifths ratio as the explanation. During the period that ended with the Hartford convention and the treaty of peace the New England leaders were unceasing in their attack upon "slave representation," as they called it. At the Hartford convention it formed the leading grievance. The convention demanded an unconditional repeal.

During this same time Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory, not for the purpose of destroying the sectional balance of power, but complacent in the belief that it would do so. We thus behold, during the earlier Jeffersonian period, the spectacle of the agricultural South and the commercial East tampering with the sectional balance of power. Of course, permanent balance of power was impossible in a rapidly expanding country, and both sections must have realized that eventually the forces of nature would tip the balance in favor of one section or the other or in favor of a section not yet born. Such eventualities were regarded as remote and were not permitted to disturb the peace of mind. It was the overthrow of the sectional balance by artificial, political methods which caused uneasiness and wrath, for it indicated inter-sectional ill will or gross selfishness.

The Missouri controversy, 1819-20, marked the decline of the agitation by the Northeast to repeal the three-fifths ratio clause as a means of weakening the political power of the South and inaugurated the second and final phase of the struggle of the North to destroy by artificial methods the sectional balance of power. This second phase was to prevent the formation and admission into the Union of any more slave states, which meant, from the political and social point of view, the exclusion of southern states. While the demand for exclusion was based partly upon what we may call moral reasons, Rufus King and the other northern leaders in this debate were quite frank in asserting that the Missouri debate was a struggle between the slave and free states for political power.

The two phases of that sectionalism which led to the Civil War, while causing a slow accumulation of sectional grievances, were not marked during the thirty years prior to the Missouri debates by excessive ill will or serious disregard for the comity of sections. Indeed, up until the time of the Missouri debates, despite the rivalry of sections which almost disrupted the Union, there was maintained a certain urbanity and self-restraint on the part of the leaders of the rival sections; for as long as the founding fathers lived and exercised influence over public affairs, there seems to have been a common realization-indeed, a common recollection-that the nation had been founded upon the principle of mutual tolerance of sectional differences and mutual concessions; that the nation had been constructed upon the respect of each section for the institutions, opinions, and ways of life of the other sections. But the years laid the founding fathers low and their places were taken by a new and impatient generation who had no such understanding of the essence of national unity. The result was that urbanity, self-restraint, and courtesy-the ordinary amenities of civilized intercourse-were cast aside; and in their gracious place were substituted the crude, discourteous, and insulting language and conduct in inter sectional relations now so familiar in the relations between the totalitarian nations and the so-called democracies. It was the Missouri debates in which intersectional comity was first violated; and it was the political leaders of the East, particularly the New Englanders and those of New England origin, who did it when they denounced in unmeasured terms slavery, the slaveholder, and southern society in general. It is noteworthy that the southern

leaders, with the exception of one or two, including John Randolph, ignored this first violent, denunciatory, insulting language of the northerners during and immediately after the Missouri controversy; ignored them at least in that no reply in kind was made with the possible exception of two or three, including John Randolph, who demanded that the South withdraw from the Union before it was too late. The private correspondence of the southerners, however, reveals them as resentful and apprehensive of future bad relations with the North.

Ten years after the Missouri Compromise debates, the moral and intellectual leaders of the North, and notably those of New England origin, took up the language of abuse and vilification which the political leaders of that section had first employed in the Missouri debates. Quickly the political leaders resumed the tone of the Missouri controversy: and thus was launched the so-called antislavery crusade, but what in fact was a crusade against the southern people. For over three decades this attack upon slavery and the entire structure of southern society down to the custom of eating corn bread and turnip greens grew in volume and in violence. (A discussion of the motives behind this crusade would lead us far afield and into bitterly controversial questions. It does seem clear, however, that political and economic considerations were thoroughly mingled with the moral and religious objection to slavery.) One has to seek in the unrestrained and furious invective of the present totalitarians to find a near parallel to the language that the abolitionists and their political fellow travelers used in denouncing the South and its way of life. Indeed, as far as I have been able to ascertain, neither Dr. Goebbels nor Virginio Gayda nor Stalin's propaganda agents have as yet been able to plumb the depths of vulgarity and obscenity reached and maintained by George Bourne, Stephen Foster, Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, and other abolitionists of note. Let me use a few of these-mo

Word Count: 4827