

What Caused the Civil War?

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked and killed nearly 3000 Americans. Over 2700 died in the Trade Towers alone. These violent acts led to American involvement in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By mid-July, 2007, coupled with the September 11 disaster, the war on terror had claimed over 6000 American lives. Seeing no end to the crisis, many Americans were confused and troubled.

Now step back to another time, and another war. It is early morning September 17, 1862. Dawn is breaking along Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg, Maryland. 55,000 Confederate troops under Robert E. Lee are squared off against an even larger Union force led by George McClellan.

Hell breaks loose – and in the space of several hours in the West Woods, along Bloody Lane, in the false cover of Miller’s 20-acre cornfield – 4800 Confederate and Union soldiers lie dead on the field. Another 18,000 are wounded. Though particularly bloody, Antietam is just one day in a war that by 1865 will claim over 600,000 Yankee and Rebel lives. The death toll of the Civil War is equivalent to a Trade Tower disaster occurring every Tuesday for four years.

This comparison is not to minimize the horror of September 11, or the tragedy of the war in Iraq. It is meant to underscore the fearful devastation of the Civil War. This DBQ asks how such a war came to be.

Preserving the Delicate Balance

The United States had been divided North

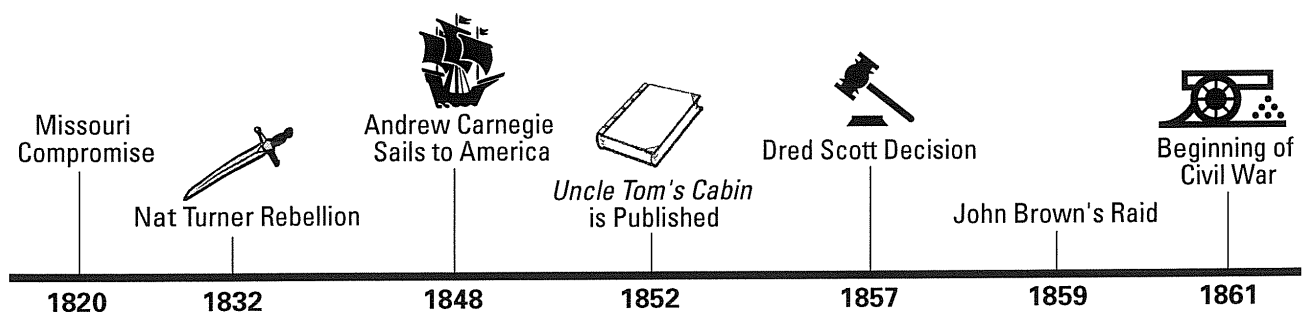
and South from its beginning. The framers of the Constitution did not even use the word “slave” in the document, fearing that the Southern states would not join the new government. They devised the awkward Three-fifths Compromise which gave slave states the right to count slaves as three-fifths of a person in order to pad their representation in the House but denied any right of citizenship to those slaves. Thus began a pattern whereby the United States’ leaders chose to compromise rather than take a chance on tearing the new nation apart.

For the next seventy years the United States was like a teacup sitting close to the edge of a shelf. Whenever American politicians forgot to leave their heavy boots at the door, the teacup would rattle and shiver ever closer to the edge. This happened quite regularly when new states applied for admission to the Union. North and South both feared that the other would overpower it in Congress. The balance between slave and free states had to be maintained.

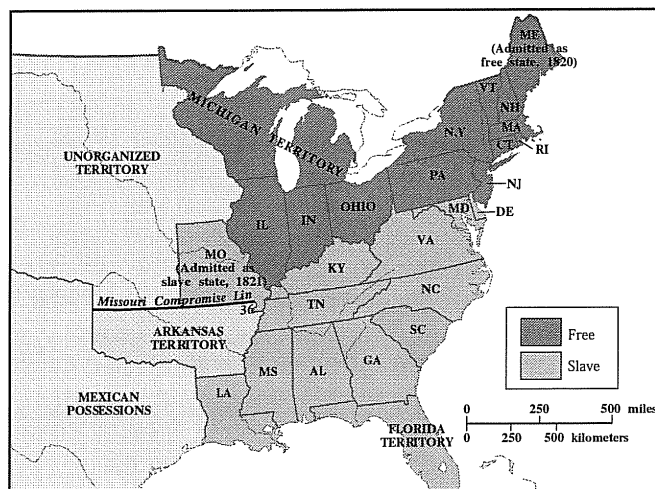
The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 excluded slavery from the area north of the Ohio River known as the Northwest Territory, but slave holders moved west to new Southern states like Alabama and Mississippi. The teacup rocked but stayed on the shelf.

In 1820 Congress solved a new crisis by admitting Maine to the Union as a free state to balance the admission of Missouri as a slave state. This was the famous Missouri Compromise. At the same time it was decided that slavery would henceforth be prohibited

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north of the southern boundary of Missouri – 36 degrees 30 minutes.



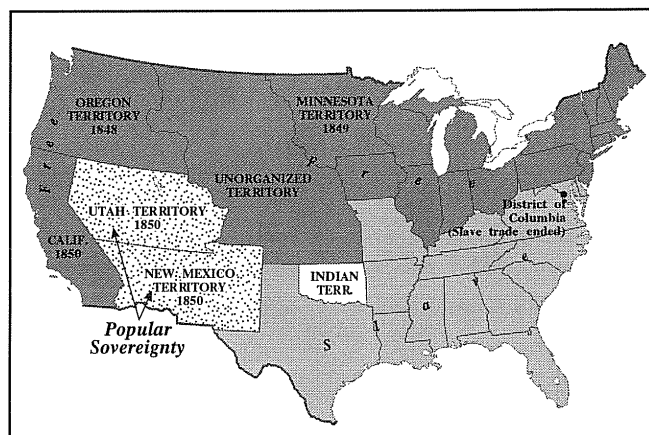
After eight years of relative calm, tension between North and South soon arose in a different form – economic conflict. In 1828, and again in 1832, the issue of tariffs threatened to tear the United States apart. A tariff is an import tax on goods coming into a country. It is designed to protect domestic producers. When foreign businesses have to pay a tax on what they sell, they must raise the prices they charge, making locally produced goods more attractive to buy. The South had little industry. It bought many manufactured goods either from Europe or from protected Northern businesses. The South felt overcharged and cheated.

When high protective tariffs were passed by Congress in 1828 and 1832, South Carolina, led by John Calhoun, threatened to nullify them, making them null and void within that state. This raised the issue of states' rights. Did states have the right to ignore federal laws they didn't like? Calhoun claimed that the states had the final say on which laws they will obey. There were threats of secession from Southern congressmen. After long and bitter debate, a bill with lower tariffs was passed. Again, a compromise kept the teacup from crashing to the floor, but the cloud of states' rights hung over the country.

The Compromise of 1850

In 1850 the United States was evenly divided

with fifteen free states and fifteen slave states. With the recent addition of new territory resulting from the war with Mexico, this balance was again in jeopardy. California pressed Congress for admission as a free state. In the midst of threats of secession from Southerners who feared a loss of political power, Congress, under the leadership of Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas, reached yet another compromise. A deal was made. For the North, California was admitted as a free state and the slave trade (but not slavery) was abolished in the District of Columbia. For the South, a new and stricter Fugitive Slave law was enacted and the remainder of the Mexican Cession – the territories of New Mexico and Utah – would be formed into states without restrictions on slavery. The people in those states would have the right to decide themselves whether to be slave or free by a



vote, a process called popular sovereignty. The tea cup was saved once again.

Compromises, by their nature, rarely totally satisfy anyone, but as the 1850s began, the United States had weathered several sectional crises and remained intact. Yet, by 1861 the country was at war. What follows are 14 documents which help explain why the Civil War was fought. It is not intended that the documents tell the whole story. History– and the Civil War – is more complicated than that. However, the documents do tell important parts of the story. Use them as best you can to answer the question before us, “What Caused the Civil War?”