

Reasons The North Opposed Slavery

Throughout American history, the differences between the northern and southern states have often been the cause of divisions between the two. The American Civil War was the climax of an escalating feud between the north-based Union and the south-based Confederacy, a feud which had significant basis in the different attitudes and lifestyles of each side's respective citizens. Although the Civil War was based on more than one issue, slavery became a considerably important topic as the War went on. After numerous disputes about state and federal rights, and the election of Abraham Lincoln on an anti-slavery platform, several "cotton states" seceded from the United States, sparking what would become the Civil War. While it is certainly true that a significant portion of the North's anti-slavery conviction was based on moral principles, to argue that morality was the sole factor in the Union's abolitionist ideals would be a false generalization. In fact, many of the North's anti-slavery ideals were not based on morality, but rather political, economical, and even racist factors. The anti-slavery ideology of many northerners extended far past mere moral rationale and into reasons of self-gain. Unfortunately, this area of history has often been modified to place the North (whose ideals formed the foundation of modern America) in a better light.

By the start of the Civil War, there were a variety of different factors which caused the North to oppose slavery, many of which were politically based. Politicians in the Union used the issue of slavery as justification for the Civil War, while citizens used slavery as a basis for their anti-Confederacy sentiment. In reality, by 1850, "there were only 347,525 slaveholders in a total white population of about 6,000,000 in the slave states. Half of these owned four slaves or fewer and could not be considered planters." By the time the Civil War started, slavery in the South was a dying institution.

Despite this, the North continued to use slavery as a justification for their inherent dislike of the South. These sentiments stemmed from a long-lasting mistrust between the two sides. Thanks to the sectional division of the country, the South had a different climate, geography, a differently structured economy, and different moral, racial, social, ideological, and political views than the North. It extended farther than that though. The North desired the industrialization of America, whereas the South was rooted firmly in their agriculture-based lifestyle. Set in their "peculiar" ways, the South was proving to be a nuisance and embarrassment to the North.

Even within the federal system, northerners detested southerners for the imbalance of power they held in government. "The bitterness...was greatly aggravated by the wide imbalance in the distribution of political power and economic and numerical strength within the United States. The North now far outstripped the South in wealth, strength and numbers, and yet the South remained very strong in all branches of the federal government." Simply put, the North was looking for any excuse to hate the South. They

believed the South was the bane of America; to them, southerners were odd, stubborn, and stuck in an antiquated lifestyle that northerners simply could not accept. However, these reasons alone were not enough to form a real moral opposition to the South; the North needed an issue which they could exploit and use as justification for their anti-Southern sentiments. Their solution was slavery (this perhaps explains the North's fairly sudden shift from pro-slavery ideals to a sudden staunch abolitionist ideology). "Of all the differences between North and South, slavery was the most obvious, inescapable, deep rooted and controversial...it provided the symbol of North-South differentiation" Slavery extended far into the morality, idealism, and prejudice of each side. It was an issue they were each passionate about and, ultimately, unwilling to compromise over.

By exploiting the issue of slavery, the North was able to blame America's woes on the South, specifically on slavery in the South. They twisted logic, going so far as blaming the South for the troubles of African Americans in the North. In his anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, editor and well-known abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison editorialized that "The toleration of slavery in the South is the chief cause of the unfortunate situation of free colored persons in the North." Any excuse to blame the South, or put the South in a negative light, was used; by doing so, northerners were able to convince themselves of the South's immorality (and, therefore, justify their disapproval). Slavery provided the North with the validation they needed for their crusade against the South.

This logic was not confined to the citizens; it extended to politicians, who used the issue of slavery to justify their war against the South. For example, Abraham Lincoln, one of American history's most celebrated abolitionists, was not nearly as anti-slavery as many today believe he was. A clever politician, Lincoln's primary concern was not the abolition of slavery, but rather the preservation of the Union. In an 1862 letter to Horace Greeley, founder of the *New York Tribune*, Lincoln stated: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." When it comes down to it, the entire Civil War was centred around preserving the Union. The North had never taken the South's threats of secession seriously. When the South finally did secede, many northerners were strongly opposed to it as their primary goal had always been a single, united, industrialized America.

Lincoln and other northern politicians needed a reason to substantiate fighting the South; slavery was the perfect choice. It was a moral issue that struck strong feelings within the people. It turned the Civil War from a war about secession into a war about slavery; in essence it turned the Civil War into a battle of good versus evil. The abolitionist movement was merely an excuse the Union used to justify their war and achieve their goals.

Even the Emancipation Proclamation, the supposed pinnacle of the abolitionist movement, had underlying political motivations. Despite its important place in American history, the Emancipation Proclamation did not free a single slave. The Proclamation was designed to apply only to rebel state territories where Congress had already outlawed slavery (Lincoln understood the importance of keeping the border states - Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware - content and, as a result, the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to them).

The Proclamation itself was never meant to fight the immorality of slavery; it was designed to demoralize the South, affect the diplomacy of other countries and, ultimately, justify the Civil War. It had the desired effect on the South; it was demoralizing to the poorer, white soldiers who no longer felt that they were fighting for their way of life, but rather for wealthy plantation owners to be able to hold on to their "property."

By the start of the Civil War, European countries (such as Britain and France) had long since abolished slavery and were firmly against its use. The Proclamation was designed to show Europe that the Union was firmly an abolitionist nation, while entrenching the view of the Confederacy as a slave-holding nation. These countries knew they could never support a slave-holding nation, and they could not justify provoking a nation fighting for abolition. The Emancipation Proclamation was never really about slavery; it dealt with slavery on the surface, but its deeper purpose extended far past abolition and right into justification and motivation for the Civil War.

While politics certainly played an important role, the abolitionist movement in the North also had its root in economics. As the nineteenth century progressed, changes in technology and the economy were industrializing the North at a rapid pace. Infrastructure improvements such as roads, railroads and canals were turning America from a rural country into an integrated, national society. The major exception was the South which was firmly set in an agriculture-based lifestyle - a lifestyle which relied on a foundation of slavery. Many northerners (especially businessmen) strongly resented this fact. They saw America as a growing industrialized nation; the South was continuing to prove both a nuisance and an embarrassment as they refused to join together as a single nation and embrace industrialization. Opposing slavery would seem a natural choice for these businessmen. Without slavery, the South could not hope to continue their lifestyle and would be forced to embrace the industry-based, nationalist ideals of the North. In fact, this is potentially why many of the first abolitionists in America (for example: Josiah Wedgwood and Moses Brown) were also noted industrialists.

The industrialization of the North also brought to light the need for cheap labour. While this need was usually filled by a steady flow of immigrant workers, many factory workers of the time were African American (who, thanks to the racism of the North, were unable to get better jobs). As industrialization continued on, so did the need for cheap, strong, and effective labour. To businessmen and industrialists, bringing former southern slaves

north to work would have seemed an effective way to fill their factories; to do this, they would have had to fight for abolition in the South.

It is a common misconception that the abolitionist movement was always based on a pro-African American stance. In fact a large portion of the anti-slavery sentiment had its basis in racism and an inherent dislike of the African race. Many northerners, especially immigrants, saw slavery as the reason the country was flooded with blacks. They disliked the fact that blacks were filling their streets and taking their jobs. French historian and political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville noted that “race prejudice seems stronger in those states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists, and nowhere is it more intolerant than in those states where slavery was never known.” By opposing slavery, northerners were also denying the African American race a legitimate spot in American society.

Leading up to the Civil War, the North was still quite racist towards blacks. Although northern slavery had been dissolved, anti-black feelings were still strong. Abraham Lincoln himself stated that he had “[never] been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality...there must be the position of superior and inferior” (although it is difficult to understand Lincoln’s full meaning through a quotation not in full context, this suggests that Lincoln, despite being an abolitionist, agreed with the common view of the time: that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and, as such, should be denied the same privileges as them).

African Americans were never truly accepted in northern society; in fact, during the American Revolution almost five thousand (roughly fifty percent) of African American soldiers crossed sides and fought for the British. The North was not and never was a black-friendly territory, despite what modern history has made it out to be. Anti-black sentiments ran deep and were ingrained within many northerners. For some, fighting for abolition was not a matter of fighting to free blacks; it was a matter of fighting to remove blacks from American soil.

While it is certainly true that the North rejected slavery for reasons other than morality, morality did play a particularly important part. However, this was not morality that had stemmed from natural conclusions about freedom; it simply came from the fact that the South was pro-slavery and thus, to be anti-South, one had to be anti-slavery. The strongest support of this is the fact that, for an exceptionally long period of time, the North allowed and supported slavery. Even long after the slave trade was abolished, slavery continued on in the North. In fact, when the first abolitionists in the North made themselves public, they were met with riots and protests.

However, in a relatively short period of time, northern slavery was suddenly forgotten. Over a period of a few decades, the history of slavery in the North was buried; even

nowadays it is often difficult to find information about this time period. In part, this was a northern effort to absolve themselves of guilt. However, the main reason they did this was to create a mythology for a “New America.”

In the years preceding and during the Civil War, the North’s foremost concern was undeniably the preservation of the Union. At the time, though, each state saw itself as an individual body with its own set of laws and beliefs (and a rather loose allegiance to Washington) . To unite and solidify the states under one flag, a new set of morals and ideals for all to follow needed to be instituted. These morals had to be bold, they had to be defensible, and they had to define the nation America was to become. Originating in New England, this pro-freedom, pro-democracy ideology would have never worked in a slave territory. Thus, the history of slavery in the North had to be buried, and northerners had to actively fight for abolition. This anti-slavery viewpoint was also beneficial in that it united the North against the already detested South, characterizing them as anti-American. “The North, and New England in particular, sought to demonize the South through its institution of slavery; they did this in part by burying their own histories as slave-owners and slave-importers...In so doing, they characterized southern interests as purely sectional and selfish.” In the north, to be anti-slavery was not seen as “anti-evil”; to be anti-slavery made one anti-South and in favour of a new, united America. The North’s anti-slavery morality did not come naturally; it was fabricated to contrast the South and unite the rest of the country together against an identifiable cause. To assume that the North’s moral reasons to oppose slavery were solely based on their inherent good nature would be ignoring the influence that their anti-southern sentiment played.

The North’s role in the abolitionist movement has too often been characterized as a battle between good and evil, or morality and immorality. Realistically there has never been a single conflict in history where the sole motivation for one side was “the fight for justice”; the Civil War was no exception. Even abolition in Europe was not a morality-based decision; it was an economic one. The end of slavery in Europe “was due less to increasingly kind masters or to the pressure of the church than to the fact that the static labour demands of the feudal system seldom made the sale and resale of workmen necessary.” Common arguments that the North fought to oppose racism and immorality are naive and simplified. Northerners themselves were quite prejudiced against blacks, and most of them had little or no concern for the welfare of southern slaves; they simply wanted to strike the South on a solid, definable issue.

Just like the South had reasons to preserve slavery, the North had their own reasons for opposing it. These reasons were not based on the good of humanity, but rather on self-gain. The reality is that the North’s opposition to slavery was based on political and anti-south sentiment, economic factors, racism, and the creation of a new American ideology. American history has, in a way, been censored to forget this fact. It is an example of history being recorded by the victor – most patriotic Americans do not want to hear that the North fought against slavery for selfish reasons. While it is certainly

pleasant to believe that the good of humanity led the North to fight against slavery, the reality is that their motivation was based on self-gain and not good human nature.