
COOL HEADS COULD HAVE AVERTED CIVIL WAR; [City Edition]

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In recent years it has become politically correct to hold that the Civil War was inevitable, and that it was basically a Good Thing. The argument runs that the war freed the slaves and caused us to commence the long and agonizing process of living the creed set forth in the Declaration of Independence.

The war did free the slaves, and this indeed was a Good Thing. But the war was not inevitable, the slaves could have been freed without war, and the war brought on the greatest disaster ever to befall this nation.

The Civil War killed 600,000 Americans - by far the worst losses our nation has ever sustained. The war's destruction impoverished the South for three generations. This poverty applied a severe brake to the entire nation's prosperity until after World War II. We can see an example of this today in the enormous cost that West Germany has had to bear in bringing East Germany and its derelict Communist economy into a united nation after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

The war set back the emergence of the United States as the world's largest economy for at least 20 years. If the Civil War had not occurred, the U.S. would have become the Earth's greatest economic power by about 1880 - instead of around the turn of the century when it did achieve this status. And rather than being hesitant and inward-looking as we were as a result of the war, Americans would have been confident, expansive, and ready to assert our power and ideals everywhere. If the United States had stepped boldly on the world stage in the 1880s, it might have curbed the avarice of Britain and France and the aggressiveness of Germany - and prevented world war.

A persistent American myth is that the South was so adamant about the peculiar institution that it preferred to go down in flames rather than grant freedom to the slaves. This is nonsense. Only 10 percent of the Southern whites owned slaves, and only about 4 percent of the whites constituted the Southern aristocracy - that is, the rich people who owned substantial numbers of slaves. Ninety percent of the Southern whites did not own slaves, and 96 percent did not rely on slaves for their economic survival.

By 1860 it was plain to everyone with any vision that slavery was on its last legs. Leaving aside the moral revulsion that it was arousing, slavery was an astonishingly inefficient means of acquiring wealth. It still existed only because members of the aristocracy - who had ruled the South since the earliest days of the colonies - had found it in their interests to force unpaid bondsmen to make money for them by planting and harvesting cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane. But raising cash crops by hand labor in hot fields was a poor and slow means of making money. By 1860 the industrial revolution had shown much quicker and more effective ways to create wealth - by machines.

However, the aristocrats were little interested in industry.

They spent the bulk of their wealth on conspicuous consumption: travel, clothing, entertainment, and building the huge mansions that dot the South to this day. Jane Jacobs, the great expert on the growth of cities, has shown that before 1860, for example, most of the excess capital in Charleston, South Carolina, could not be invested in the South, and went instead to Boston to build factories in New England.

Northern industrialists saw the nation's opportunity more clearly. They recognized that an immense common market could be created, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and that this common market would soon dwarf every other economy on Earth. To create this common market, they had to build transcontinental railroads. But they also had to keep out British industrial goods. Britain had invented the industrial revolution a century previously, and by 1860 possessed by far the greatest industrial plant and the best and cheapest industrial products. If American factories were to compete, the United States had to establish a high protective tariff to exclude British goods.

The Southern aristocrats were not interested. They sold most of their cotton and tobacco to Britain and Europe, and received cheap industrial goods in exchange. It was a good deal from their point of view.

When the new Republican Party under Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 election, the aristocracy, fearing a move to outlaw slavery, pulled the seven most southerly states out of the Union in late 1860 and early 1861.

At this moment the greatest tragedy in American history was played out. No aristocracy has ever given up its privileges

willingly. The French aristocracy brought on the French Revolution; the Russian aristocracy brought on the Russian Revolution. The Southern aristocracy was equally selfish and short-sighted.

The enormous mistake Abraham Lincoln made was to insist on forcing the South back into the Union. It was this force, this invasion of the South - not protection of slavery - that caused four more slave states to secede, united the whites against him, and drove them to resist to the last inch. Guarding one's home and family from destruction is one of the most powerful of human emotions. The war soon convinced the great majority of Southerners that slavery was entirely too expensive. Robert E. Lee told Ulysses Grant at Appomattox that the South was as opposed to slavery as the North and, even if possible, would not reinstitute it.

Had Lincoln been willing to negotiate, a solution could have been found. Unlike France in 1789 and Russia in 1917, the South was a democracy. If Lincoln and the Republicans had agreed for the United States to buy all the slaves at fair market value, the vast bulk of the Southern whites would have seen this as a reasonable solution, and would have forced the aristocracy to yield.

If this had happened, the Southern aristocrats, with cash in their hands, would have become as eager exponents of industry and a high tariff as the most protectionist Northern factory owner. Slavery would have ended without bloodshed. The South would have been spared destruction. And the United States would have transformed itself in short order into the greatest nation on Earth.

Could the country have afforded to buy the slaves? Indeed it could. In fact, the country actually paid the price two or three times over, without even counting the cost in lives and destroyed property. A Harvard economist, Claudia Goldin, calculated a couple years ago that less than half the money the North and South spent on the war would have paid for the freedom of all the slaves at their 1860 market value, with enough left over to give each slave family 40 acres and a mule.

Credit: *Bevin Alexander, a resident of Bremono Bluff, is a historian and author. This article is excerpted from a speech he delivered to the Richmond Rotary Club in August. Alexander's most recent book is 'Robert E. Lee's Civil War.'

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