

# HIUS112: The US Civil War

•*Prof. Rebecca Jo Plant*

## Lecture 1:

“Somehow the cause of the war”: Slavery and the U.S. Civil War





# Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

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Delivered March 4, 1865

- In a month, Robert E. Lee will surrender at Appomattox
- Two weeks later, Lincoln will be assassinated
- Address includes Lincoln's first stab at history

*“On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. **Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.**”*





1861 Inauguration



# Second Inaugural, cont.

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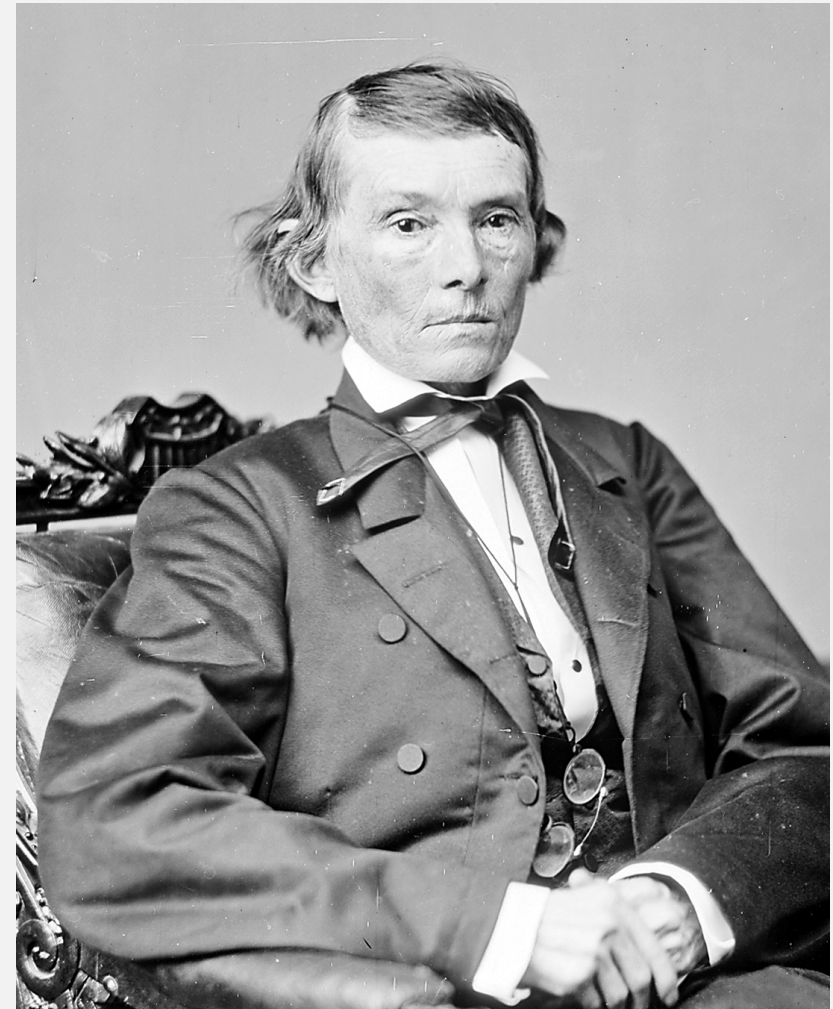
*“One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. **All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.** Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that **the cause of the conflict** might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease.”*

# Confederates' postwar accounts of the war's history

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Former Vice President Alexander Stephens in 1868:

***“The conflict in principle arose from different and opposing ideas as to the nature of what is known as the General Government .... It was a strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation, on the other side. Slavery, so called, was but the question on which these antagonistic principles ... were finally brought into ... collision with each other on the field of battle.” (A Constitutional View of the Late War between the States, 1868)***





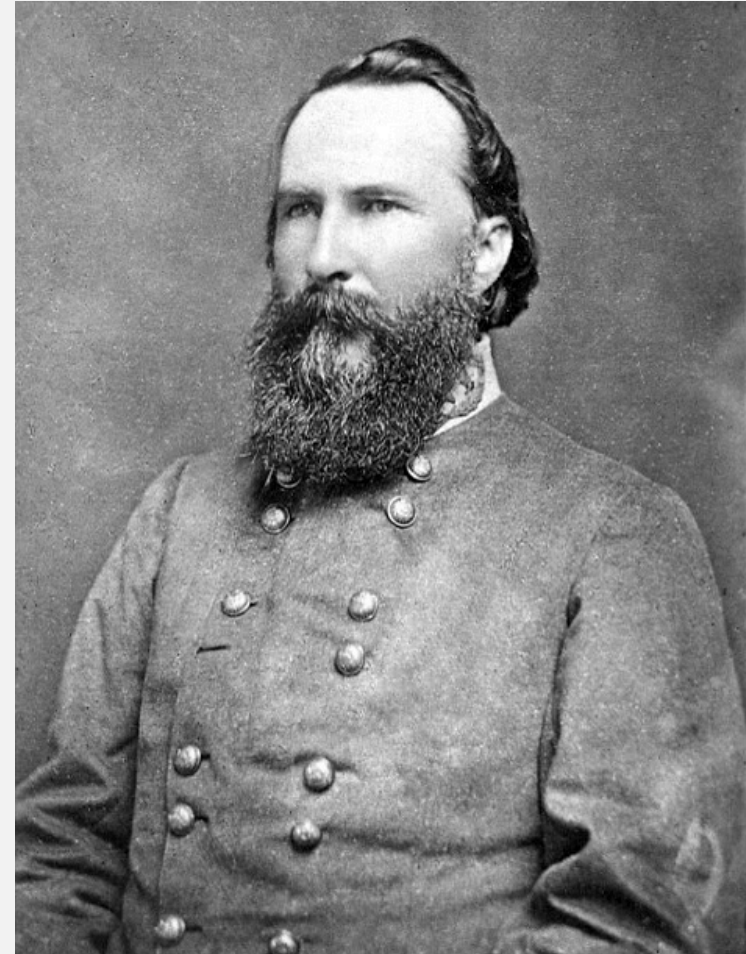
# “Cornerstone speech,” March 1861

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- But what had Stephens said at the war’s outset?
- Describing why the Confederate Constitution was superior to that of the US, he stated that Thomas Jefferson “had anticipated” that slavery would be “the ‘rock upon which the old Union would split.’ He was right.”
- But Jefferson had been **wrong** was to assert in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”
- *“Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; **its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery – subordination to the superior race – is his natural and normal condition ....**”*

# *How was slavery the cause of the war?*

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- General James Longstreet, who fought for the Confederacy: “Why not talk about witchcraft if slavery was not the cause of the war. I never heard of any other cause of the quarrel than slavery.”
  - So, slavery was the cause of the war, but what exactly does this mean?
  - Did the Union go to war to eradicate slavery?





# Most white Northerners did not want to overthrow slavery

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- In the North, racism was pervasive and getting *worse*
  - Black laws and state constitutions
    - Restricted rights African Americans previously enjoyed
    - Some newly admitted states all but prohibited African Americans from entering
  - Only around 10% of northerners held abolitionist views
  - Abolitionists were targets of incredible hostility
    - William Lloyd Garrison nearly lynched
  - Even many of those who hated slavery believed the Constitution protected it
    - Could only prevent its expansion (Lincoln)

New York  
anti-  
abolitionist  
handbill, 1837

# OUTRAGE.

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*Fellow Citizens,*

AN

## ABOLITIONIST,

of the most revolting character is among you, exciting the feelings of the North against the South. A seditious Lecture is to be delivered

**THIS EVENING,**

at 7 o'clock, at the Presbyterian Church in Cannon-street.

You are requested to attend and unite in putting down and silencing by peaceable means this tool of evil and fanaticism.

Let the rights of the States guaranteed by the Constitution be protected.

**Feb. 27, 1837.    *The Union forever!***

# Slavery in the Confederate states

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- About 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of white *households* enslaved people
  - You may come across the claim that just 6% of *individuals* owned slaves—which is technically accurate, but highly misleading as a gauge of the Confederacy's investment in slavery
- States with highest percentage of slaves were the first to secede
- Those from slaveholding families were somewhat overrepresented in the Confederate Army
- Still, most Confederate soldiers did *not* own slaves
  - Probably around 60%



# Slavery as the war's cause

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- If Northerners did not go to war to free the enslaved, and most Southerners did not own slaves, how did slavery cause the war?
- Slavery profoundly influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural worldview of the southern states, creating a culture that was, in many ways distinctive
- Every point of contention between Unionists and Confederates – religious disagreements, economic disagreements, political disagreements – came back to slavery
- And especially whether or not it would be allowed to expand

# Slavery in late 18<sup>th</sup> century

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- Well-established institution in the colonies by time of the Revolution
  - About 700,000 slaves in the US, spread across all regions
- Revolutionary ferment led to growing discomfort
  - Large slave-owners like Washington and Jefferson expressed hope for slavery's eventual demise
  - Some southern states made it easier to free slaves
    - A wave of manumissions, especially in Upper South
  - Anti-slavery societies founded, including in the Upper South
  - Some southern states banned or heavily taxed in the international slave trade
  - By 1804, most northern states had either banned slavery or provided for its gradual extinction

# Constitution/founders on slavery

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- The Constitution was the first **sectional compromise** on slavery, though nowhere in the document does the word “slave” or “slavery” appear
- The fugitive slave clause
- 3/5<sup>th</sup> clause
  - Allowed slaveholding states greater power in the House or Representatives
    - Made the votes of southern voters worth more than those of northern voters
    - Contributed to what became the idea of “Slave Power”
- Allowed for the banning of the international slave trade in 20 years
- Also in 1787, Congress enacted the Northwest Ordinance
  - Established the precedent of containment; slavery was banned from these territories



## NORTHWEST TERRITORY, 1787



# Which side was true to the nation's founding principles?

- Secessionists argued that *they* were preserving the founders' legacy
  - Most themselves held slaves
  - Founders included constitutional guarantees for slavery
- Unionists disputed this
  - Claimed that the founding generation viewed slavery as a dying institution
  - Often spoke of its corrupting influence
  - Tried to ensure its eventual demise

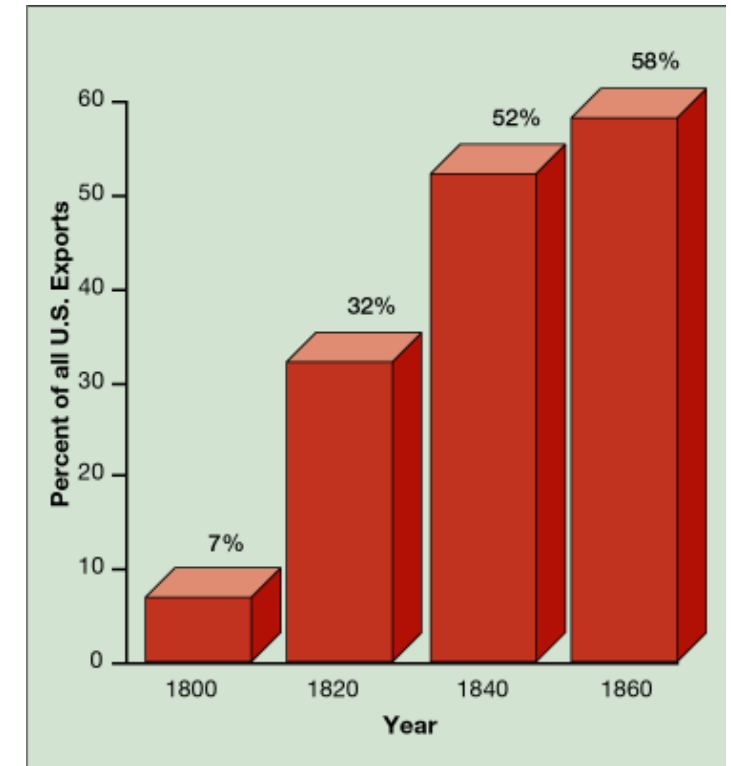
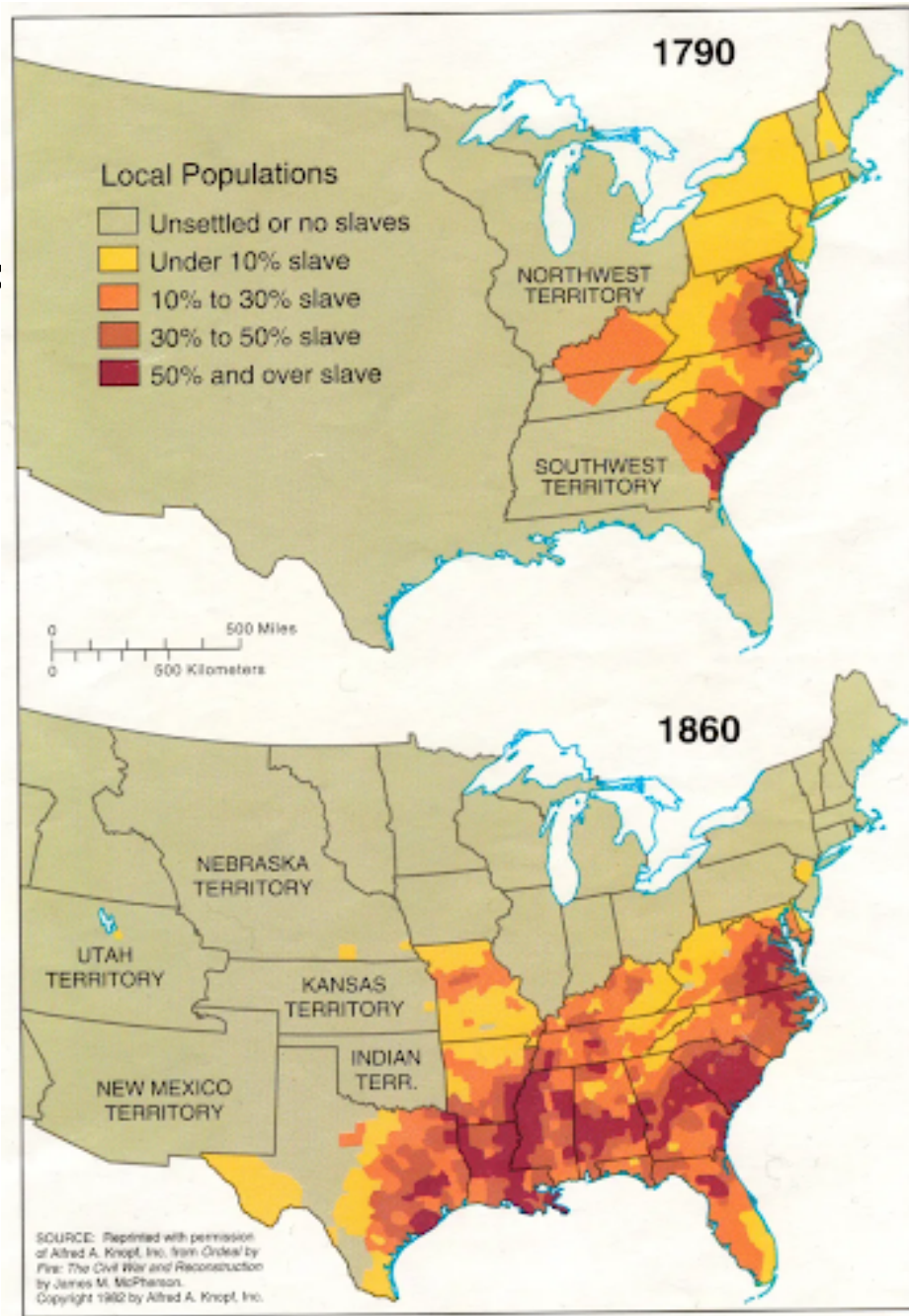


## Rapid expansion of slavery

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- Cotton revolution; as a commodity, it's the “oil” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century
    - Rising European and New England demand
    - Cotton gin
    - By 1850s, US South provided 70% of world's cotton
    - By 1860, cotton accounted for 58% of US exports
  - Led to a huge westward migration
    - 50% of slaves in the upper South were forcibly relocated
    - Enriched not only many planters, but also northerners
      - Profits fueled the banking, insurance, and shipping industries—  
all based in the North



# Expansion of slavery



Year	US Slave population	US population
1770-1790	~500,000	1790: 3,900,000
1810	~1,500,000	7,200,000
1860	~4,000,000	31,500,000

# Why is the Civil War so critical?

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- Survival of the nation at stake
  - Significance extended of this beyond the US itself:
    - Could a republic endure?
  - Revolutionary consequences
    - Freeing of nearly four million slaves
  - New Constitution: the Second American Republic?
    - Reckoning with the nation's "original sin" required massive overhaul of the US Constitution
  - National trauma that eclipses all other wars
    - Most reliable research now conservatively estimates that 750,000 men died
  - To this day, Americans are still fighting over the Civil War

# New sense of nationhood

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- Prior to the war, Americans were intensely localistic
  - 80% lived in towns of 2,500 people or less
  - People's identification with their towns and states stronger than their identification with the nation
- Change of sensibilities reflected in language
  - After the war "the United States" became a singular rather than a plural noun
    - "The United States contains..." rather than "the United States contain..."
- People thereafter spoke less about the US as a "union" and more about it as a "nation"

# A stronger federal government

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- Prior to war the federal government was a distant entity for most Americans
  - Most visible in the institutions of the Post Office and Customs House
- Flurry of wartime legislation changed the nature of the federal government
  - Power to draft citizens into the army
  - To put down civil unrest
  - To collect taxes
  - To issue a national currency
  - To end slavery and define the citizenship rights of the formerly enslaved



# Power shift within the US

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- War finally answered the question of which social and economic system would dominate:
  - A political economy based on slavery, with a very limited federal government?
  - Or, a political economy based on free labor, with a stronger federal government that fostered domestic manufacturing?
- Former Confederate states were devastated economically
  - Region lost 60% of their wealth/capital
- Northern industries were spurred
  - Wealth/capital increased by 50% during the war
- Transfer of political power – no more “Slave Power”
- Nonetheless, the former Confederate states continued to exercise outsized power
  - Example: FDR had to seek cooperation of southern Democrats to pass New Deal legislation

# This course: War's coming, course & consequences

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- Focus is not just on the war years (1861-65)
    - 1850 to around 1877
  - Why start in 1850?
    - Somewhat arbitrary; could start much earlier
      - Compromise of 1850
  - Why end in 1877?
    - Contested presidential election
      - Withdrawal of Union troops from former Confederacy
  - Focus primarily on social and political aspects
    - Course satisfies your DEI requirement

# Basic information about this course

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- All reading is on Canvas; you do not need to purchase anything
  - Please finish the reading \*before\* lecture
- You can always raise your hand to ask questions in lecture
- Requirements
  - Weekly quizzes (200 pts)
  - Slave narrative assignment (150 pts)
  - Newspaper OR diary assignment (150 pts)
  - Midterm (200 pts)
  - Final (300 pts)
- Please do NOT share, post, or sell downloaded course content – not okay!

# Assessing the war's impact

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According to Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, the Civil War “*uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought [change] so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations.*”